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*Sassy subversions, knowing glances, and Black women's laughter* is a qualitative study that examines the nuances of Black women's humor away from the comedic stage. Additionally, it provides an alternative approach to understanding Black women's lived experiences. More specifically, it explores the pedagogical proprieties of Black women's humor suggesting that the everyday Black woman has the potential to be a public intellectual. Through a Black feminist lens, this research analyzes Issa Rae's HBO series *Insecure* and uses focus groups to further investigate how Black women use and understand humor. Evidence from this study suggests that some Black women intentionally and unintentionally use humor to critique and alleviate oppressive conditions created by racism and sexism. Black women also use humor to reinforce communal ties through coded language and communicative patterns. As a result, this study builds the foundation for a Black women's pedagogy of humor that positions humor as a method of survival while sustaining and celebrating cultural connections. Within this pedagogy, Black women's humor is both an object of study and a set of tools for Black women to strategically use their humor.

SASSY SUBVERSIONS, KNOWING GLANCES, AND BLACK WOMEN'S  
LAUGHTER: MOVING TOWARDS A BLACK WOMAN'S  
PEDAGOGY OF HUMOR

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

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To the many Black women who share their wisdom with style, grace, and a dash of their  
own Black women's humor.

## APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### LAUGHING ALL THE WAY: MY JOURNEY TO HUMOR RESEARCH

Laughter has always been a part of my life. My mother tells me stories of how much she laughed with her sisters and friends during her pregnancy. According to my mother, when I came out of her womb, I was laughing instead of crying. She says I was the happiest newborn; I say I'm the product of too much anesthesia. I continued to grow watching my grandmothers, great aunts, aunts, and cousins recall various experiences using quick one-liners and other jokes. From my aunt smiling and telling my older cousin, "you don't have to marry rich, but you need to marry right," to my mother, with eyebrows raised and a slow grin, telling me before I left the state for graduate school, "don't let life happen," better translated as, "don't get pregnant," humor remained important in my life. This common language spoken by these women rooted in humor and shrouded in innuendos and inside jokes, flowed seamlessly through universal cues and gestures. I learned these cues quickly and discovered the art of wit and banter early. These quips held lessons in survival, codes of conduct, and even strategies to get through the daily trials of life. The lessons shaped the ways I maneuvered through the world.

In my daily interactions with other Black women including my friends, my colleagues, and even my students, I began to recognize humor more regularly. It was not always in joke form with clear punchlines, but it was spontaneous and delivered with an impeccably timed "side eye," a slight eyebrow raise, or even a signifyin' grin. While

teaching classes, student humor was not always warranted, and on the surface, it even seemed disruptive, yet I found myself inserting pieces of my own humor to capture my student's attention through small anecdotes. Still, it was not until this program, that I was drawn toward humor as something to study more in depth. While in my second course in the program, I listened to the life stories of Black women. As I conducted interviews, I quickly noticed the ways three Black women used humor to recount experiences with abuse, alcoholism in the family, and displacement. In the cliché phrase, "we laugh to keep from crying," there is some truth. As seen in my interviews from that class, I realized there were thin lines between laughter, tears, and anger. How were these women able to laugh at and laugh through such traumatizing events? Was I supposed to laugh with them? Why was humor used to relay these stories and not anger or sadness? The stories and these questions stuck with me as I matriculated through this program. I no longer wanted to explore the effects of humor in the classroom as I originally intended, but I now *needed* to understand if there was a relationship between Black women and humor. This study set out to gain a better understanding of Black women's everyday humor by describing what it is, examining what they find funny, and outlining the ways it functions for Black women.

To begin looking at this topic, I took to television. In February of 2017, *The History of Comedy* aired on CNN. In this 8-part series, producer, Todd Miller, sought to display the evolution of American comedy from the use of crude language, to women in comedy, to how today's political climate remains ripe for comedy. Though most of the material was taken from standup comedy, episode 3, "The Comedy of Real Life,"

focused on every day or situational humor as adapted by sitcoms and movies. What makes this type of humor funny is its relatability. Most people can relate to humorous discussions about family, relationships and romance, coming of age, and even the general ridiculousness of life. In the episode, George Carlin notes, “every comic sees the world through a prism that the average person doesn’t see through” (Dubensky, 2017). The individual “prisms” make the difference in how various situations are represented and how humor is produced. The CNN series was an accurate depiction of American comedy, reflecting social hierarchies and further demonstrating the ways mainstream American comedy was, and still is, dominated by white men. Though Episode 2 “The Funnier Sex,” comments on the difficulties many women experienced gaining access to the comedic stage, and many found themselves behind the scenes in the writer’s room, the absence of Black women was highly noticeable. This is also seen in academic spaces where there is still a lack of Black women represented within academic humor research resulting in the limited discussion of Black women’s everyday humor. By providing limited discussions on Black women’s humor, the voices and experiences of Black women continue to be silenced. Black women are funny, yet within comedy they remain invisible despite their hypervisibility. Today this is changing as perceptions of Black women continue to evolve and they continue to carve out nontraditional spaces to use their voices.

With the advent of various social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, more Black women are breaking through the invisibility by creating, writing, producing and starring in creative projects. More specifically, older Black millennial women (currently between the ages of 34–39) have taken the lead in

creating spaces and opportunities where there once were none or limited access. Black women, “tend to create a unique discourse specific to their identity and distinct form of Black conversation styles” (Davis, 2015, p. 25). Through the use of hashtags, including #BlackGirlMagic, and #BlackGirlsRock, Black women are sharing and chronicling humorous, and often ironic stories, as well as triumphant ones. Franchesca Ramsey, former writer for *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore* and host to the MTV news web series *Decoded*, began her career on YouTube. In 2012 her video, “Sh\*t White Girls say... to Black Girls” went viral. In the video, she humorously recites the phrases that many Black girls and women hear repeatedly, such as, “Not to sound racist but, why isn’t there a White entertainment television?” or “Can I touch your hair? Is it real?” (Ramsey, 2012). The two-minute video clip uses humor to critique daily interactions between Black and White women. She seemingly points out what may seem ridiculous, but for many, there is truth in the humor.

As the video clip was reposted on major news outlets including MSNBC and CNN, Ramsey ultimately created a conversation surrounding the common experiences of Black women. Following in this brand of humor, one that I call and will later describe as older Black millennial humor, recognized by its satirical elements and quick wit, along with its critiquing properties and relatable topics, this study investigates the role humor plays in the older Black millennial woman’s lived experience. Using Issa Rae’s HBO television show *Insecure* and conducting focus groups with Black women while watching the show, I explore the role and pedagogical properties of Black women’s humor by investigating two questions:



1. What is a Black woman's pedagogy of humor (BWPH)?
2. How does a BWPH demonstrate the ways Black women are public pedagogues?

Though these research questions are intertwined, they serve different functions. Humor can be pedagogical. In Ramsey's YouTube video, she used humor to critique whiteness while also providing instruction on how not to approach Black women by forcing viewers to see the absurdity in her line of questioning. Through asking secondary questions such as what is pedagogical about Black women's humor and what are the lessons learned through Black women's humor, I set the foundation for creating a Black women's pedagogy of humor (BWPH) as a way to analyze and articulate Black women's lived experiences. Once I discovered what was pedagogical about Black women's humor, I demonstrated the ways Black women, Issa Rae in particular, demonstrate elements of public pedagogy. Public pedagogy, coined by Carman Luke (1996), is the pedagogy of the everyday, or as Giroux (2000) asserts, "Those intersections where people actually live their lives and where meaning is produced, assumed, and contested in the unequal relations of power that construct the mundane acts of everyday relations" (p. 355). I argue that humor, as mundane as it may seem, holds power. As an extension of question one, where I study the educational properties of Black women's humor, question two expands the literature on where education takes place and who facilitates learning. Education, and in turn pedagogical practices, extends beyond traditional classrooms and other institutions of learning and into people's everyday lived experiences. This includes, but is not limited to, learning from popular culture such as television, films, music, and public spaces such as museums and memorials (Ellsworth, 2005). I argue that Issa Rae's HBO

television show *Insecure* is a form of public pedagogy that humorously folds the various strands or understandings of public pedagogy. By inducing laughter, Rae is able to use a combination of pleasure and critique (Mayo, 2008) to connect to a racially mixed audience. By extension, I argue that everyday Black women are also public pedagogues who are already using humor to make critical connections between popular culture and everyday life.

### **Theoretical Framework: A Black Feminist Approach**

It is argued that Black feminism was never created, but that there have always been Black women's sensibilities or ways of thinking. Within academia however, and as a response to the women's movements in which Black voices were silenced or overshadowed, Black feminism emerged out of necessity and the need to change social conditions. Although Black women were active within the early feminist movements and made allies with white women to further women's liberation, it was quickly realized by many women of color that their voices were being silenced by a generalized, "common oppression" (La Rue, 1970). Because all women's oppressions were deemed the same, the plight of Black women and other women of color were erased. As King (1988) asserted in the separation of feminism and Black feminism, "We continually establish and reestablish our priorities" (p. 312). Black women made themselves a priority.

Black feminism shows the flexibility of feminist theory as it seeks to discuss not only various oppressions by means of positionality, but it seeks to be revolutionary by demanding change. Villaverde (2008) stated that Black feminism is revolutionary and radical by default because it sits at the margins of mainstream society. This being said, to

sit at the margins there needs to be an agenda one of activism, agency, and visibility.

From the very beginning, Black feminist thought, as Collins (2000) argued, “Is fundamentally embedded in a political context that has challenged its very right to exist”

(p. 6). As a result, she outlines six key features of Black feminist thought:

1. Understanding why Black feminist thought is needed, linking experiences and ideas while recognizing the tensions and challenges of doing so.
2. Making connections between multiple U.S. Black women’s experiences.
3. Acknowledging African American women’s intellectual contributions.
4. Making insights into African American women’s thought.
5. Remaining focused on social justice projects. (2000)

Each section builds on the idea that the experiences of Black women, though not always universal, are essential to understanding multiple systems of oppression. By recognizing and understanding the lived experiences of Black women, Black feminist thought seeks to use general or common knowledge to help Black women cope and ultimately survive despite differential treatment.

Within Black feminism naming is important. For example, being able to name oppression, or define self holds power. Alice Walker (1983) in her work *In search of our Mothers’ Gardens*, coined the term Womanist in which she offers several definitions including:

1. From *womanish* (Opp. Of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color... usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or *willful* behavior.
2. A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as a

- natural counterbalance to laughter), and women's strength... committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female
3. Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. (p. 11)

To be a womanist is to not only love Black womanhood completely but to center Black womanhood in all things. Both theories also celebrate gendered cultural knowledge using common discourse to understand everyday life by situating narratives as a central part of knowledge (Taylor, 2013, p. 43). They differ in that the term womanist seems to offer a more interpretive and therefore flexible definition that allows women to subscribe to what appeals to them (Taylor, 1998). Even with such differences, many still use the terms Womanist and Black feminist interchangeably to identify and highlight the value in a shared Black women's sensibility. Within this study I use the term Black feminisms as a way to recognize the multiple ways of interpreting and performing these theories.

I made the conscious decision to study Black women with the understanding that a collective Black woman's consciousness exists (Collins, 2000) but may not manifest itself in the same way for every Black woman. As a way to better understand Black women's lived experiences and by extension my own experiences, I draw on Black feminist theory. Born out of the need to recognize Black lived experiences and the need to understand and reconcile oppression (Evans-Winters, 2015), Black feminist theory informed the overall purpose, the data collection, and the data analysis of my research while also informing how I applied the traditional humor theories to Black women. Black feminist research is rooted in the recognition of various forms of knowledge, especially those that are not clearly recognized by traditional research (Collins, 2002; Dillard, 1995; Evans-Winters, 2015). Within this study, Black feminist theory is not only about

expanding the validity of knowledge production and who can produce it, but through a social and critical lens it seeks to reimagine the appearance of knowledge and centers experiences and even intuitions over traditional theory. It does not however, eliminate theory altogether, instead it builds theory based on “non-traditional” and often unrecognizable forms of knowledge. Black feminist theory gives me both the language and the foundation to explore Black women’s humor as its own way of knowing.

### **A Note on Language**

In Black literacy tradition, Fulton (2006) recognizes the importance of Black women’s language, as she coined “Black feminist orality,” where language is used to empower Black women while critiquing hegemonic structures through “verbally articulating the self and experience” (p. 2). Evans-Winters (2015) writes, “Taking on a dialogical voice, the act of listening, writing, and conversing grounded in one’s cultural point of reference, in the design, and pursuit of knowledge, is a result of the Black women’s experiences in communal and civic spaces” (p. 136). It has always been important for me to write in a way that my mother understands. My research is not only for me, but for my mother, my aunts, my cousins (by blood and for those who have adopted me) and other Black women in my family and friendship circles. These women are academic in their own ways and do not need formal training to recognize their wisdom. My goal was to write in a way that was accessible to all audiences and demonstrate the rigors of the project. Though humor may seem lighthearted in nature, my intent is that this study highlights the seriousness of humor and its various social functions as conceptualized by Black women. As you will see, the women’s voices are

written to showcase their vernacular and voice inflection. These are our stories starting with Issa Rae.

### **Older Black Millennial Humor and the Coming of Issa Rae**

I first came in contact with Issa Rae in 2011 through her YouTube show, “Awkward Black Girl” (ABG). At the time I was searching for something new to watch with characters that looked like me. I was unable to find this on television, so I took to YouTube. In the 2000’s YouTube was a place where Black writers were creating and producing their own shows on subjects they cared about. I was thrown into shows like “Hello Cupid,” “That Guy,” and “Roomie lover Friends” from the online network Black & Sexy. These online shows portrayed young Black people in a way that felt more authentic in comparison to the many negative representations on reality tv. From the smaller Black online networks on YouTube, many of the cast members found more mainstream success.

Though I do not consider myself an “awkward Black girl,” in most cases, I could relate to the show in many ways. The series follows J, played by Issa Rae, as she lives her daily life. In the opening scene of the first episode titled, “The Stop Sign,” J is seen rapping to her favorite inappropriate rap song when she sees a work colleague sitting in the car next to her. J, as the narrator and voice for her inner monologue, then asks, “What’s the protocol for repeatedly running into someone at a stop sign?” To her chagrin, they meet again at the next stop sign where she decides if she should wave again or not as her inner monologue says, “No seriously how many fake laughs are acceptable before it becomes too much?” Visibly frustrated, she tries to speed away from the moment. In this

brief, three minute and 40 second episode, I laughed aloud, felt her awkwardness, and even asked myself, “Well what is the protocol?” (Rae, 2011). I was hooked on the show and remained hooked for the entire two season series. Issa Rae showed me a different Black girl, one that was a closer image to myself. Her humor was smart, dry, and not completely full of gimmicks. But before Issa Rae, the famed creator of *Awkward Black Girl* (ABG) and later HBO’s *Insecure*, there was Jo-Issa Rae Diop.<sup>1</sup>

Issa Rae was born January, 15, 1985, in Los Angeles, California, to an American mother and an African father. She spent her childhood living between Dakar, Senegal; Potomac, Maryland; and Los Angeles, California. In her book, *The Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl* (Rae, 2015), she discusses the various ways these environments shaped her and ultimately added to her humor. From being made fun of for her African heritage or, because she was American born, not being Black enough or having enough rhythm for her all white friends in Maryland, to not being skinny enough for the Los Angeles crowd, each painful experience was retold with humor. In high school she developed a passion for acting and for writing. At age 16, after watching “Love and Basketball,” which she calls “the last great Black film made in the 90’s [where] for the very first time I had seen a woman was just ‘normal black’ on screen,” (Rae, 2015, p. 41) she set out to write her own movie “Judged Covers.” Though she never finished the manuscript, she continued to write and to act. While at Stanford University, she majored in African and African American studies and began acting on and off campus (Wotham, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> It was not until 2008 that Jo-Issa began to regularly refer to herself as Issa Rae (Rae, 2015).

The internet proved to be a welcomed space for new and suppressed voices, namely Black women creatives who found their first success in the digital space. While a Senior in college, Rae wrote and directed the web series “Dorm Diaries” portraying the lives of Black students at Stanford recruiting her friends to star in the series. Once the series was uploaded to Facebook,<sup>2</sup> it was an instant success not just at her school, but at other schools such as Duke, Harvard, and Georgetown (Rae, 2015). After graduating college, she continued to hone her craft writing and directing. YouTube was an open platform for budding artists and that is where Rae found her first success with “Awkward Black Girl” gaining a cult following on YouTube. After failed attempts to find success outside of YouTube, Rae was finally able to secure a deal with HBO where her new show *Insecure* found success.

### **Digital Success for Older Millennial Women Who Use Black Millennial Humor**

“If it weren’t for YouTube, I would be extremely pessimistic... YouTube has revolutionized content creation” (Rae, 2015, p. 46). Black millennial humor is rooted in the sociohistorical moment and housed in digitized popular culture (Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and the like). These platforms are instrumental to drawing attention to and archiving Black aesthetics and lived experiences (Bradley, 2015; Payton-Monk, 2017). These digital spaces, social media in particular, provide platforms for women of color to create new content. Brandy Monk-Payton (2017) claims, Black popular culture has transformed through digital technology. In her article #LaughingWhileBlack, she uses

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<sup>2</sup> At the time, Facebook was only open to college students or those who had verified college email addresses.



Luvvie Ajayi, Crissle West, and Issa Rae to examine the ways web-based artifacts (online blogs, podcasts, and YouTube), produce racialized and gendered humor rooted in ridicule. These three women best exemplify the complexities and various deliveries of Black Women's humor.

Luvvie Ajayi from the blog site *AwesomelyLuvvie.com* launched her blog in 2006. On the site, she reacts to politics, popular culture, and current social justice issues. Her 2016 book, *I'm judging you: The Do-better manual*, is an extension of her blog. The collection of essays stem from her daily observations. She dishes out "shade," or colorful critiques and corrections, while urging her readers to "do better." She writes, "*I'm Judging You* changes the game and snatches wigs one page at a time. It is a guide to getting some act- right online and in real life...the truth is this book is an amazing excuse for me to judge folks" (2016, p. 3). Ajayi creates humor by "eliciting... shade as common sense or as folk commentary on the general awfulness of people" (Monk, 2017, p. 24). In the chapter, "When Baehood Goes Bad" Ajayi tells a story about her friend Tina who is dating Carlos. As Ajayi is listening to her friend's frustrations with Carlos' gambling problem and lack of transportation, Ajayi has had enough. In disbelief she says:

I was like, 'let me make sure I get this straight. Your boo, who is an gambling addict riding around town on a bike, got mad at *you* for not wanting to scoop his ass up because it was raining and he was stuck at the casino? YOUR TEN-SPEED RIDING, GAMBLING-ADDICT BOO WITH A TEMPER ALSO LIVES WITH HIS MAMA? (Ajayi, 2016, p. 28).

This biting humor makes the audience see the ridiculousness of both Carlos and Tina ultimately making the case for why they should both "do better."

Crissle West is the co-creator, along with her counterpart Kid Fury, of popular podcast *The Read*. The podcast launched in 2013 and has since stayed at the top of the iTunes charts. West identifies as a Black queer woman with strong opinions on politics, social justice, and popular culture. The podcast's title, *The Read*, serves as both an indicator of the content and the particular audience it serves. Both hosts are openly gay and reading serves as a signifyin' corrective action, stemming from black queer spaces. Dorian Corey from the Black drag ballroom culture documentary, *Paris is Burning*, explains, "shade comes from reading. Reading comes first. Reading is the real art form of insult. You get in a smart crack and everyone laughs and ki-kis because you found the flaw and exaggerated it" (as cited in Monk, 2017, p.19). Ultimately reading, in the vernacular, is a correction in the form of seemingly playful banter and a method used by many Black older millennials. The last segment of the podcast is the read portion where the hosts critique or "read" a topic. The point of each read is to comment on the absurd through ridicule. In the December 6, 2018 podcast episode titled, "You Don't Have to Mail," both Crissle and Kid Fury read PETA (People for Ethical Treatment of Animals) for its viral twitter post urging people to end "anti-animal" language. PETA claims, "Just as it became unacceptable to use racist, homophobic, or ableist language, phrases that trivialize cruelty to animals will vanish as more people begin to "appreciate animals for who they are" (Pitofsky, 2018). Crissle and Kid Fury in disbelief, comically read a list of phrases that PETA would like to eliminate in order to "remove speciesism." The phrase "Bringing home the bacon" should be changed to "Bring home the bagels" and the phrase, "Beat a Dead horse" should be changed to "Feed a fed horse" (Pitofsky, 2018).

Both West and Fury immediately point out the ridiculousness of the new phrases. West's humor comes through flavored with biting social commentary, steeped in profanity and no nonsense passion as she exclaims with a hearty chuckle, "These crackas!" and "Ohhh the whitest shit." She repeatedly says, "speciesism" and can barely contain her laughter as Kid Fury reads the list of changed phrases. After hearing that "bringing home the bacon," should be changed to "bringing home the bagels," she exclaims:

and get slapped! If I wanted bacon, bagel is not a substitute!...I'm sorry, bagels need gluten in order to be good. It's science! It's fucking science! You can gluten free a lot of that shit, but bagels ain't it. They need that chewy gluten bullshit in gluten sorry girl. You're a fucking lie... and when you tell people you're doing this out of speciesism! Aren't all living things a species?! (Fury & West, 2018).

As they continue to discuss the changes, the humor becomes a more critical social commentary on the current political climate. They continue:

West: If I want flesh... on a bone... that's what I'm going to have. PETA's not gon stop me, but girl, first of all, "unacceptable to use racist, homophobic, or ableist language" Bitch where? Where is it unacceptable to use this language? Have you seen the President of the United States? He talks like this all the time and people love it! People vote...

Fury: People vote for him because of it!

West: Yeah. It's not unacceptable to say those things. It isn't! It's acceptable. People do it all the time!

Fury: Make Nigger cool again!

West: (*cackles*) and you don't get in trouble for it! People are very rarely punished for these things (Fury & West, 2018).

This conversation shows the corrective banter as they, in the Luvvie Ajayi way, urges PETA to “do better.” Because this is a podcast and intended to be heard and not read, the humor is in the silences and voice inflections of both Crissle and Kid Fury. They “found the flaw” in PETA’s logic and by saying the phrases aloud, “they exaggerated the flaw” as a corrective means. Issa Rae’s brand of comedy, though not as overtly critical as Ajayi and West, still provides a social critique of Blackness and society at large, by normalizing Black culture and portraying the complexities through the use of older Black millennial humor.

### **Older Black Millennial Humor in Rae’s *Insecure***

Issa Rae has found mainstream success because of her unapologetic portrayal of complex characters and her realistic brand of humor. Growing up in the golden age of the modern Black sitcom, Rae’s work is heavily inspired from shows like *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *Living Single*, and *Moesha*. Simultaneously she works within the sitcom formula of this time and works to dismantle this formula through *Insecure* by using her brand of older Black millennial humor, characterized as quirky, steeped in social commentary, and digital functionality. Although *Insecure* is a show that appeals to a wide audience, it is undeniable that the show centers Blackness. Using Gilotta’s (2013) framework for contemporary Black comedy, “Insecure” challenges mass media depictions of recognizable blackness by using the following characteristics of older Black millennial humor:

1. Providing a digital archive for black popular culture
2. Accentuating Black sensibilities

### 3. Expanding definitions of Blackness while critiquing existing definitions

The section below explains each characteristic of older Black millennial humor and outlines the specific ways Rae<sup>3</sup> uses these characteristics in season one of *Insecure*.

#### **Providing a Digital Archive for Black Popular Culture**

Black popular culture is constantly changing, and as Black culture continues to become popular culture consumed by the masses, it has become important to archive Black culture found in digital spaces like social media platforms. According to a 2015 Pew Center research poll, 35% of Black people use Instagram, and 38% use twitter. In this same poll, users ages 30-49 make up 25% of social media usage (Krogstand, 2015). To understand digital humor, one must be attentive to the everyday lived performances of the user. For example, to understand Black twitter,<sup>4</sup> one has to be familiar with signifiers of Blackness such as aesthetics, cultural references, and speech patterns such as signifyin'. Rae's humor in *Insecure* is steeped in capturing these contemporary Black moments catalogued through the use of digital humor, more specifically through referencing memes and hashtags found on popular social media sites such as Instagram, twitter, YouTube, Vine, and Facebook. According to Knobel and Lankshear (2006) memes have three main characteristics: humor including satire or social commentary, cross-reference to popular texts including movies, music, television, and "anomalous juxtaposition" by taking items, words

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<sup>3</sup> When discussing Issa Rae's character on the show, I refer to her as Issa. When discussing her role as the creator of the show I use Rae.

<sup>4</sup> Black twitter is not a physical place but is a way to categorize twitter users who identify as Black.

and images, that are potentially incongruent and using them to create humor (Yoon, 2016, p. 96).

Rae is able to speak to the older millennials, age 30–39 through memes and twitter hashtags that are both trendy and familiar. Using “technocultural displays of Black identities” (Brock, 2012, p. 538) to relate to a Black audience while talking about universal subjects, Rae writes contemporary Black digital humor into *Insecure*’s script. In episode one of *Insecure*, Issa uses popular internet reactions when her best friend Molly expresses her concern about her dating life:

Molly: And then he goes from calling me every day to sending me text message

Issa: Oh damn

Molly: Right! And then this motherfucker got the audacity to hit me with this bullshit [*reads text message*] “Sorry I’m not looking for a relationship right now. Sad face.”

Issa: He did not sad face you! I will slap you right...

*Molly shows her the text message*

Issa: bish... Whet? (*making a confused face*).

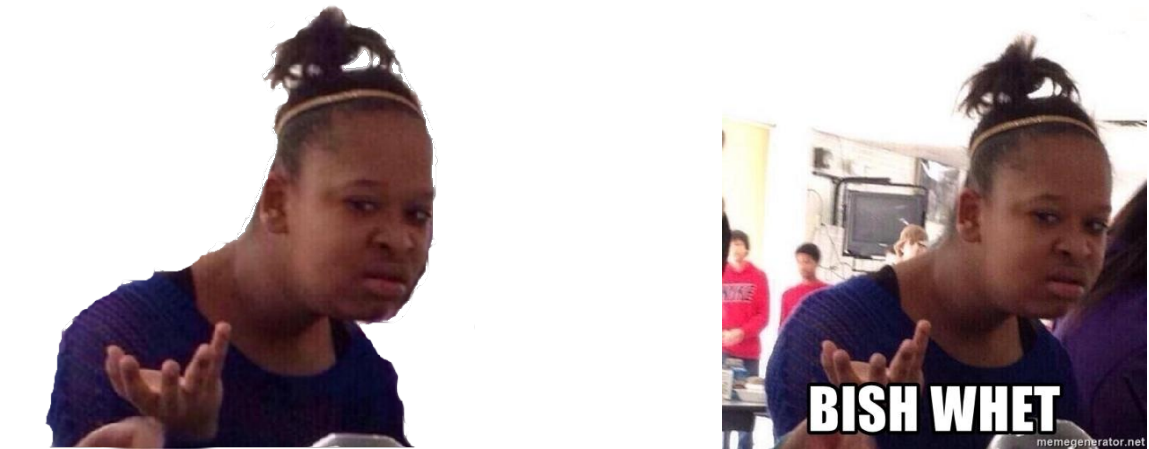
Molly: That’s my life. (Rae & Wilmore, 2016)

In this example, Rae makes use of both a vine video and an internet meme for humor. Toni Rotimi (2013), a teenage Vine sensation, is linked to the phrase “bish whet!” the phonetic pronunciation and the politer version of “bitch what!” used to signify shock, disgust, comradery, and any other function the user chooses. This is coupled with the image of a young girl made Instagram famous when her friend posted this picture of her (see Figure 1). This image quickly became the viral face to signal confusion and

disbelief. In the scene, Issa uses both this face and the words, “Bish whet!” reenacting the popular meme and signaling her shock and disappointment in Molly’s relationship.

**Figure 1**

**Viral Confusion Meme**



Rae’s *Insecure* audience is familiar with the meme, the phrase, and the various performances of the phrase and therefore able to quickly find the scene humorous. The inspiration for Black popular culture is rooted in Black culture and lived experiences. Within *Insecure*, Rae highlights Black sensibilities through setting and music.

**Accentuates Black Sensibilities**

Black sensibilities are “the enlivened, vibrating components of a palpable black familiar” (DeFrantz & Gonzales, 2014, p. 7). Rae is intentional about creating a digital archive of black culture as discussed, but more specifically for her home, Inglewood, California and other ethnic spaces in Southern Los Angeles. In a 2018 interview with The Atlantic, she explains the ways *Insecure* and many of her projects are a “Love letter to L.A.” Inglewood provides the setting for *Insecure*. The opening credits of the first season

begin with a video montage of the city featuring the characteristic California palm trees, Randy's donuts, The Forum, Louisiana Fried Chicken, and an array of ethnic shops in the area. Like many cities, Inglewood and other areas in South LA are facing the tensions and the growing pains caused by gentrification. As the properties are being bought and sold, the landscape is changing. Rae, who still calls Inglewood home, prides herself in making the show "a time capsule" as she laments that fact that since the inaugural season, the landscape has continued to change and popular filming locations for season one no longer existed for season two (Ioffe, 2018). Rae writes her frustrations with gentrification into the script. In Episode Seven, "Real as F\*\*K," Issa hosts a fundraising event for her job with the nonprofit organization, "We Got Ya'll." Instead of looking for a venue in Malibu where the We Got Ya'll staff normally hosts the function, Issa suggests looking outside of Malibu and towards Baldwin Hills—the Black and Brown area the organization serves. As the staff sets up the venue for the fundraiser, they share their reactions to the lavish Black community:

Ken: I drive past this neighborhood every day and I didn't know homes like this existed up here.

Kitty: I know. It's soo... pretty (*in disbelief*)

Patricia: Yeah what's this neighborhood technically called Issa?

Ken: Oh, someone told me it's the (*whispers*) Black Beverly Hills. Is that true?

Issa: (*soliloquy*) Listen here you gent, Columbus motherfucker. If you don't stay the fuck away. I don't even know why I told you about this neighborhood because y'all take everything! Can we have anything?! Leave! (*end of soliloquy*) Guys I don't know, but I do know we have a lot of work to do. (Prentice & Rae, 2016)



Although Issa's soliloquy voicing frustrations about gentrification is humorous, it is much different than her actual response where she avoids the conversation all together. Rae is using her Black sensibilities, knowing when, where, and who to tell her truths to, because she knows she is in "mixed company" and this company is not prepared for or want the true response to their inquiries. In the scene that follows, Issa is able to really share how she feels in a manner that is more authentic and without judgement with Molly who shares the same sentiments and sensibilities:

Molly: Girl, did I just see two white families walking their dogs?

Issa: (*smacks her lips*)

Molly: Since when did Baldwin Hills get all gentrified?

Issa: When white people were sitting up in these \$4000-a-month one bedrooms in Malibu like "them niggas ain't that bad!" (Prentice & Rae, 2016)

Issa tells her truth, and the truths of many in South LA, sharing the tensions that come with gentrification. In continuing her love letter to her communities, South LA and the Black community, she tells the stories of many through music.

The music for the show is just as important in highlighting Blackness as the script itself and provides the soundtrack to a variety of Black lived experiences. As Xavier Jernigan (2018) comments, "LA serves as a supporting character in the show and *Insecure* has a distinctly modern West coast sound." To create this West coast sound, and to further her love letter to her city, she enlists the help of Raphael Saadiq, the composer, and member of R&B group Tony!, Toni!, Toné!; Kier Lehman, the music supervisor; and Solange Knowles, the music consultant for season one, and not only Beyoncé's younger

sister, but an artist in her own right. Season one, Episode one opens with Kendrick Lamar's song, "Alright," from his 2015 project "To Pimp a Butterfly." Upon its release, the song quickly turned into a self-care anthem voicing the struggles within the modern Black experience and reminding listeners of a turbulent history and present (Gilbert, 2016). Rae chooses this song for the opening credits to accompany the video montage of the city showing that Black people within this show are indeed "alright."

### **Expands Definitions of Blackness While Critiquing Existing Definitions**

"The African American community continues to change and diversify, there will also be a need for other types of humorists who reflect the increasing diversity of black populations" (Gillota, 2013, p. 28). David Gillota (2013) recognizes a new brand of Black humor that drifts away from the grit found in the 1970's and away from modern urban "chitlin" circuits of the 1990's as seen through Def Comedy Jam and BET's Comic View and has moved to a more nuanced, hybrid version taking the best parts of each movement remaining social conscious. Because older black millennials reaped the social benefits of the 1960's civil rights era taking on "hybrid status as individuals who are part of multiracial communities" (Wanzo, 2016, p. 52), the brand of humor often reflects this as those in this generation navigate Blackness in an age of multiculturalism therefore expanding what popular culture identifies as Blackness.

Gillota (2013) describes the "Black nerd persona," where the new Black comedian undermine the popular Black as cool or Black swagger representation of Blackness on mainstream outlets. He draws on Keegan Michael Key and Jordan Peele of Comedy Central's *Key and Peele*, and Donald Glover from NBC's *Community* and FX's

*Atlanta*. All three men have reached mainstream success as they have expanded representations of Black masculinity. Though Gillota mentions Issa Rae as one who also has a “Black nerd persona,” the term seems to be more gendered and best relate to Black men especially since Rae has never considered herself a nerd, but awkward which for her, is different. Just as the “Black nerd persona” expands notions of Black masculinity, Issa Rae’s awkward distinction, expands notions of Black femininity. Both terms, however foil negative portrayals of blackness, hypermasculinity for men and innate self-assuredness or super strength for women.

As Wanzo (2016) suggests, Issa Rae represents the ways blackness and awkwardness conflict. She describes Lena Dunham, of HBO’s “Girls,” and Issa Rae’s brand of comedy as “Precarious-girl comedy” that “makes endless alienation a source of humor [and] the protagonists embrace the idea that she repels others as a sign of her individuation” (p. 29). In Issa Rae’s early YouTube show *Awkward Black Girl* (ABG), the character J is alienated because of her awkwardness in the inability to navigate social situations. The humor is not in the mundane situation, but in her responses to them. This kind of precariousness is not new and in fact almost a norm in mainstream television shows that feature white women lead actresses from *Seinfeld* to *New Girl*, however for Black women, this precariousness is relatively new and most witnessed in the 1990’s with characters such as Freddie from *A Different World* and Sinclair from *Living Single*. In both of these shows, the awkward, yet lovable characters were a part of the secondary storylines. However, as the shows were cancelled, so were the mainstream portrayals of awkward Black women. Issa Rae helped to fill the void with her viral YouTube show

Awkward Black Girl and today through *Insecure*. Rae is more concerned with “the in-between characters,” “the ones not extremely pretty and cool... There are so many different representations of black people, from the nerd to the quirky to the cool” (Ioffe, 2018, para. 24). Through *Insecure*, Rae continues to expand how Blackness looks and more importantly how it is performed on the small screen.

### **Conclusion and Organization**

Humor, though subjective, still relies on cultural and social connections. A Black women’s humor has distinctive properties that enable Black women to better understand how they experience the world. For these reasons, this study investigates the pedagogical properties of Black women’s humor and the ways Black women are public pedagogues or educators beyond the traditional classroom. Using Black feminist theory, I analyze Issa Rae’s *Insecure* in addition to focus groups to propose a Black Women’s pedagogy of humor that recognizes the various functions of humor and the lessons Black women learn through humor.

This project is organized into six chapters. In this chapter, Chapter I, “Laughing all the way: My Journey,” I introduced and framed this study rooted in my personal connections to humor and the ways my intuition prompted me to further study Black women’s humor beyond the comedic stage. I outlined my research questions and the ways Black feminist theory gave me both the language and the framework to theorize Black women’s humor. This chapter ends with an introduction to both Issa Rae and *Insecure* situating them key components to this study. Chapter II begins with a brief discussion on the difficulties in conducting research on Black women’s humor. The

chapter also provides an overview of the existing traditional humor theories and the important concepts and bodies of work that inform this study. Chapter III, “Methodology, Methods, and Design,” discusses qualitative research using Black feminist theory, outlines the study including summaries of chosen *Insecure* episodes, introduces the focus group participants, and describes the methods for conducting and analyzing the data. Chapter IV, “Den Dialogues: Black Women in Conversation with *Insecure*,” provides a deeper examination of prominent themes found in both *Insecure* and the focus groups. This chapter highlights the voices of Black women (on television and in the focus group). Chapter V, “A Black Women’s Pedagogy of Humor,” answers my research questions directly by outlining humor as a public pedagogy, introduces critical insights to Black women’s pedagogy of humor, and the way it functions for Black women. Chapter VI concludes with implications for future research and closing remarks.

## CHAPTER II

### IN SEARCH OF BLACK WOMEN’S HUMOR: CREATING BODIES OF WORK AND REVIEWING EXISTING LITERATURE

I was excited. I had chosen a dissertation topic that I loved. Not just one that allowed me to watch television all day, something I would later learn is not fun after watching something repeatedly for months on end, but a project that fit me both personally and academically. The topic didn’t feel like I was performing academics. I knew this topic was important, but I needed to find a way to explain its importance not just from a place of knowing or mother wit but rooted in “academic” research one that is easily recognized by the academy. As I began conducting preliminary research, I quickly discovered that Black women’s humor as I came to know and love it, did not exist in the literature, specifically in the qualitative research that my committee was looking for. How do you conduct a literature review on a subject that has not been studied? I made an appointment with the research specialists in the campus library. I went to the library with a fresh notebook in hand and confidence that the research specialist would perform tricks using Boolean points in ways I had not. To my dismay, the specialist confirmed that there was no existing research and congratulated me on being a pioneer. Against my inclination to project my frustration onto her and give her a side eye, I acted like I had home training and politely thanked her for her help and left the library with two stress-induced twitching eyes and more questions than answers.

As a teacher who often teaches undergraduate students, I knew that I needed to be patient. Conducting research is like purchasing and completely a jigsaw puzzle, you have to find the pieces that fit and resist the temptation to jam, or more aggressively, pound the pieces together to fit. But I knew this was very different than a purchased jigsaw puzzle. In academic inquiry you create the puzzle and in turn control the pieces. This literature review lays out the pieces, the concepts and various theories needed to understand and situate this truly an interdisciplinary project on Black women's humor. The research is a culmination of work found in Humor studies rooted in Philosophy and Sociology, Communications and Media Studies, Black performance studies, and generational studies as I outline the need to study Older millennial humor. These disciplines are not discussed entirely in isolation but fused together in a way that highlights where Black women are missing in the literature, and where Black women's humor enters. The review is in chronological order starting with the older bodies of work surrounding humor theories and then in ways that the subjects appear in the literature.

### **Black Humor**

It is often said that we must laugh to keep from crying. Perhaps for the African American, the collective *we*, this is a true statement. Humor has always been a fixture in the Black community. As Lawrence Levine (1977) stated, "Laughter was a compensating mechanism which enabled blacks to confront oppression and hardship" (p. 299). Historically the outward expression of laughter or humor by Black people was seen as simple and oftentimes disruptive; however, from slavery through Reconstruction and

later the civil right era, humor has been used to cope and provide commentary to an ever changing social condition.

For African Americans, humor has taken on many forms not limited to jokes and tall tales and finds its roots in oral traditions. The dozens taken from the West African tradition of exchanging insults typically at the expense of women has been a longstanding tradition for Black banter (Brock 2011; Schechter 1970; Wald 2012). As Brock (2011) noted, the dozens have transformed since its African origins. Typically, this is a game played by young men and boys to express and oftentimes defend masculinity and sexuality. This may classify this type of humor as aggressive in that if all parties are not aware of the boundaries, then a fight may ensue. The blackface minstrel tradition seen from 1840's to as late as the 1950's, represented a complex time in Black humor. For Black actors, as Lott (1996) explained, blackface and minstrel performances were not liberating. Minstrel performances instead created pity and delusion while reinforcing stereotypes of Black laziness, unintelligence, and naivety. Lott argues that for white audiences, "[The minstrel shows were] a way to play within collective fears of the degraded and threatening ... other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them" (p. 13). The shows not only portrayed slaves as happy and carefree during a time when abolitionists were fighting against slavery, but they also created fixed images of Black inferiority that would prove damaging for years to come (Riggs, 2012). At the same time however, for Black people who performed in blackface, the Black minstrel tradition became a lucrative career (Watkins, 1994).



However, the black face minstrel show set the stage for continued misrepresentation of blackness and promotes long lasting stereotypes and controlling images (Collins, 2000).

The African American woman's experience has been overshadowed by the increased emphasis on the negative representations of African American women in popular culture. According to bell hooks (2010), "Negative stereotypes projected onto black females often act as obstructions" (p. 100). These manifest in the stereotypical depictions of an angry black woman and its counterparts the mammie, the jezebel, and the sapphire. As blackface minstrel shows lost its appeal, these images carried over onto the movie screen forcing African Americans to play stereotypical roles that perpetuated the stereotypes as seen in the complex case of Hattie McDaniel. McDaniel is known for playing the role of Mammy in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*. She fits the mammy stereotype of the large, black, asexual woman, characterized by quick one-liners and nonverbal cues, who seeks pleasure in nurturing her employers. As noted by Swell (2013), "McDaniel is famously known for saying, 'Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid. If I didn't, I'd be making seven dollars a week being one!'" (p. 313). Not only does this statement from McDaniel speak to the decisions that many Black actors and actresses had to face, it also is a prime example of Black women's humor as she acknowledges the irony of her living situation caused by her social status as dictated by her race, gender, and physical size. Unfortunately, as seen within standup comedy, these conditions remain the same as seen through Moms Mabley and Mo'Nique.

African American humor as seen in the dozens, minstrel shows, and standup comedy depend on word play as a mean for warranted or unwarranted play between people who understand the same communication codes. These communication codes are vital in building and maintaining a Black identity and community. Because of the use of codes, Dance (1998) argued that although Black women's humor may be seen as a strictly in-group humor, universal themes including class, age and environment, many provide audiences the opportunity to share in the laughter. Gillota (2013) argued that Black communal spaces were important to African American humor as settings where it could be practiced, but over time, the spaces became necessary components of the humor. These gathering places, front porches, kitchens, barbershops, were instrumental in creating a safe space for African American people to forget the trials of the day. Because humor can be both verbal and nonverbal these spaces also created the stage for the production of non-verbal reactions to everyday conversations. Manifested through physical nonverbal cues such as a raised eyebrow, a quick glance to the left or right, the infamous neck roll and sucking of the teeth, as well as the frown of the eyebrow, at times, elicits more laughter than the verbal response. Because these locations too may be acknowledged as in-group safe havens, Black women are free to express such nonverbal cues in an environment where they are more understood.

For African American women in particular, humor and laughter have deeper meanings not only associated with comedic humor, but more importantly with situational humor and their quick response to others. "Black Women tend to create a unique discourse specific to their identity and distinct form of Black conversation styles" (Davis,

2015, p. 22). Carol Allen (2005) defines African American female comedy as comedy “conveyed by African American female practitioners that may have been written by and African American woman, but if not, is inflected through African American women’s sensibilities, patterns, and aesthetics” (p. 97). For those in Black performance studies this raises questions such as who can perform Black women’s humor if it is not always connected to race? African American or Black women use laughter not only as something of leisure to signify enjoyment, but as a rhetorical strategy signifying strength or to address the unreal or ridiculous. For Allen, not only does Black female humor serve as coping strategies, but it can be used as a means of entertainment and even education. As Fulton (2004) articulates, by being women in a male dominated field, African American humor must work within a system of multiple jeopardy. She argues that unlike DuBoisian double consciousness, for the Black woman, there is a triple consciousness in which she adds a battle with herself as a part of her identity. She argues that here lies both struggle and laughter. Using humor ultimately highlights and signals Black women’s vulnerabilities connected to both being a woman and being Black.

### **Black Performance Studies**

African American humor is performative. Performance has long been a part of the African American cultural traditions. As an oral culture, in which stories retell histories, share life lessons, provide encouragement, and provide entertainment to many people through generations, performance and theatricality are vital to the preservation of the culture. Black performance studies as a discipline seeks to analyze and critique definitions of Blackness and Black lived experiences paying particular attention to how

Black people perform and the effects of these various performances (Johnson, 2006). As Hall notes, performance “is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are” (as cited in Johnson, 2006, p. 446). According to Johnson (2006) Black performance studies, “provides a space for Black culture to reveal itself to itself, to come to know itself in the process of doing” (p. 449). Within this study, I represented three concepts within Black performance studies that coincided with Black feminist theory: celebrating subjugated knowledges, discovering the way Black performances are informed by historical and social contexts, and seeking to [re]define definitions of Blackness to investigate how Black women can be seen as public pedagogues, or teachers.

### **Black Performance Studies Celebrate Subjugated Knowledges**

Foucault defines subjugated knowledge as two ideas; as historical content that has been covered by “formal systematization” (Foucault, 1980, p. 81) but more importantly as “historical knowledges which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematized theory... as set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledge, located low down on the hierarchy beneath the level of cognition” (p. 82). Examples of such knowledge is found outside of traditional classrooms in the into everyday culture and lived experiences. Because such knowledge has been deemed inferior, it was disqualified as “real knowledge.” This repressed knowledge takes on many forms including humor and can often be found in hair salons, barbershops, around kitchen tables, and everyday conversations. Here Black lived experiences provide life lessons through humorous

performances resulting in general knowledge production. Though these performances of humor may be institutionally repressed, they remain valuable to the Black community as educational sites.

Researchers in Black performance studies call for every day Black performances to become sites for serious academic inquiry (Defrantz & Gonzalez, 2014). Issa Rae's *Insecure* answers this call while serving as my platform for better understanding Black women's humor. In relationship to Black feminist theory, Collins (2005) argued that reclaiming the subjugated knowledges of Black women means legitimizing the thoughts of mothers, grandmothers, and cousins, that are not seen as traditionally intellectual. By addressing a variety of topics from love and dating to race in the workplace, Rae reconnects the traditional intellect with the everyday intellect recognizing the value and contributions both have to understanding Blackness and more importantly Black womanhood.

### **Black Performances are Informed by Historical and Social Contexts**

Performance theorist Peggy Phelan (1993), when discussing the actual act of performing, argued that "performance's only life is in the present" (p.140). In other words, a performance cannot be reenacted or duplicated without revision, ultimately changes the authenticity of the performance. She argues that once this occurs, the performance disappears. This makes capturing Black women's humor difficult, because it disappears when the moment is over. More importantly Black women have the power to mask or hide Black women's humor reserving it for the in-group. Within Black performance studies, the performance, in this case what is performed, "take[s] shape

according to the historical and social context in which they exist” (Johnson, 2006, p. 457). For many African Americans, the present is often dictated by the past, therefore Black performances are informed by both present and past events. This is no different within performances of humor. By addressing a moment in time and a specific brand of humor, older Black millennial humor, I recognized how the past and present work together. Although *Insecure* is set in the present, signaled by the use of colloquialisms and a musical soundtrack of current songs, she makes reference to historical concepts and events that still effect Black thought. For instance, in episode one, she is addressing a group of young children and they ask her why she “sounds white?” While laughing, she awkwardly responds, “You got me. I’m rocking Blackface!” (Rae & Wilmore, 2016). Though the children do not make the connection to the minstrel tradition, Rae creates the humorous moment when past and the present collide. I continue to showcase these moments of collision through the women in the focus group.

### **[Re]Defining Definitions Blackness**

Researchers in Black performance studies are concerned with [re]defining Blackness and identifying and critiquing Black sensibilities defined as “The enlivened, vibrating components of a palpable Black familiar...stylized ways of being in relation to each other and our environments” (DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014, p. 8). Cremieux et al., (2013) however, determined that defined representations are often misrepresentations; therefore, it is vital to continue to study how performances of Blackness are created and reproduced (p. 1). By acknowledging that like whiteness, Blackness too is a performance,

the performer can begin to manipulate the performance and in turn the audience, “to explore, expose, and even explode definitions of Blackness” (Elam, 2001, p. 288).

In such an explosion of the definitions of Blackness, there is some concern that not having a definition of Blackness may create a loss of culture and heritage. There is an underlying fear of continued Black exploitation particularly from those outside of the Black community. hooks (1996) articulated it best when she said, “Nowadays, individual Black folks engaged in performance practice... face a culture where Blackness is increasingly commodified in ways that undermine the power of performance as ritual play [art]” (p. 218). As “a consequence of performance,” Blackness and Black people [are] re-consolidated as objects to be experienced, inhabited and known (Cervenak, 2015). Black performance theorists push through these notions of reconsolidating as they explore evolving definitions of Blackness while keeping at the core the sense of Black activism, community, and survival.

### **Traditional Humor Theories**

Humor and laughter can mean a variety of things; most obvious is the signal that something is funny. In general, humor or the response to humor, laughter, is relative to setting and taste. As Meyer (2000) stated, “Humor unites communicators through mutual identification and clarification of positions and values, while dividing them through enforcement of norms and differentiation of acceptable versus unacceptable behaviors or people” (p. 310). It relies on the bonds it creates or dismantles those bonds based on who or what is giving humor and who is receiving humor. Humor is subjective and to be understood as funny, it relies on a familiar relationship between an audience, or receiver

of information. What emerges from the literature are the challenges and the nuances of creating a single definition of humor. Humor has been a field of study within many disciplines, however, because of the psychological, and in turn physical responses the body makes to humor and laughter, much research has been conducted within the field of Psychology. Gary Fine (1983) explained, because of the measurable outcomes of humor, the social implications have been harder to map, therefore studying humor outside of the physical responses has been relatively new. As scholars try to understand the lives and lived experiences of people, humor continues to be the subject of study in many disciplines. Among all disciplines the leading scholars discuss three frameworks of humor: Relief, Superiority, and Incongruity (Fine, 1983; Meyer, 2000; Morreall, 1983; Palmer, 1994;). The section below outlines each traditional humor framework and the ways they manifest in Black humor and in particular, Black women's humor.

### **Relief**

Relief humor is most easily identified. Early humor research discusses humor as it relates to who is being laughed at, not who is making the joke and relates to the psychological response to humor. Classic approaches to humor are attributed to both Spencer (1911) and Freud (2003). The relief theory is based on the physiological responses to humor where humor and laughter are deeply connected as laughter is a direct response to humor. Spencer (1911), with roots in biology, argues that laughter is a product of nervous energy and in turn elicits an automatic response. "Nervous excitation always tends to beget muscular motion; and when it rises to a certain intensity always does it beget[s]...it manifests both that emotion and sensations tend to generate bodily



movements” (Spencer, as cited in Morreall, 1987, p. 100–101). Laughter, and in turn humor, is a product of nervous, or psychic energy and becomes a way to subconsciously overcome one’s inhibitions (Freud, 2003; Green & Linders, 2016). Humor then is a way to safely repress hostile or sexual thoughts and feelings. In this way humor allows someone to refuse experiencing the pain of suffering, “asseverating [sic] the invincibility of one’ ego against the real world... without quitting the ground of mental sanity” (Freud, as cited in Morreall 1987, p. 112). Within this framework, humor seeks to ease tensions or defuse potentially stressful situations easing tension.

Traditionally within the study of Black humor, the relief theory is better understood largely as a coping mechanism as seen in the blues phrase, “laugh to keep from crying.” It is also the theory most attributed to all minority humor including Black<sup>5</sup> humor As Lawrence Levine (1977) stated, “Laughter was a compensating mechanism which enabled Blacks to confront oppression and hardship” (p. 299). Typically, within the study of Black humor, the relief theory explains humor as a coping mechanism or as Fauset stated, “Our emotional salvation” (as cited in Levine, 1977, p. 299). Bailey (2012) comments, “In order to make reality more palatable, one must believe that the joke is on someone other than one self” (p. 257). An example of relief theory in practice and in relation to Black women is found in Taylor’s (1994) analysis of laughter in Alice Walker’s (1982) *The Color Purple*. In describing the character, Sofia, who not only

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that I am not referring to Black humor as the literature identifies it, as dark humor, but I am using Black humor to refer to humor as performed by Black people.

undergoes mental and physical abuse from men, and who is also abused, and later jailed, as a result of hitting Miss Millie, a white woman, Taylor (1994) writes:

Walker frames Sofia's story about Miss Millie's abusive driving experiment with explicit references to humorous rapport. Celie remarks at the outset that, "Sofia would make a god laugh, talking about those people she work for," and Sofia herself closes her narrative with, "White folks is a miracle of affliction"... This humor does not avoid or deny anger, but perhaps more important, its interactive rapport specifically disallows any normative view of an identity differentiated from others by greater power. (p. 466)

In order to reconcile Sofia's many negative experiences, she uses relief humor to cope with her condition. She also exhibits a Black women's consciousness in her use of humor as a "collectivistic form" of coping (Lewis et al., 2013). Within this collectivistic form of coping, Lewis et al. (2013) recall the experience of Tonya, a graduate student, who uses a book club to cope with the stresses of graduate school. She states:

It's a book club that focuses on Black women's issues and we get together with our bottle of wine, we talk about the book, and we vent and we laugh, and we get angry and we do whatever. We just release all of that frustration and all of the tension that we are dealing with on campus, you know, dealing with issues of race, class, and gender, and all of that. I mean, I think it's really helpful for us to get together; it's a very cathartic experience. (p. 63)

In this case, the laughter displayed by a group who understands her experiences or has had similar experiences, eases Tonya's tension making her better equipped to deal with her experiences with race, class, gender discrimination in graduate school. From slavery through Reconstruction and the Civil Rights era, the outward expression of laughter or humor by Black people was seen as simple and oftentimes disruptive. Recognizing that most oppressed groups share in a humor as a coping mechanism, Glenda Carpio (2010)

describes relief humor as “a balm, a release for anger and aggression, and a way of coping with the too-often-painful consequences of racism” (p. 34) and further uniting oppressed groups as they recognize a common struggle.

### **Superiority**

Defined as humor based on feelings of dominance, it is rooted in feelings of triumph or success over someone or something (Morreall, 1983, 1987). Within this theory, humor is identified by laughing at someone due to their absurdity, perceived ignorance, or clumsiness. Meyer (2000) outlined two functions of superiority theory humor, to keep social order or reinforce social norms and to create in-group bonds. Those who do not follow social norms are laughed at or made fun of as a way to correct deviant behavior. In this way, Fine (1983), argues humor can have a shaming effect making it triggering and aggressive. However, Mayo (2010) recognizes that not all aggression is malicious arguing that superior humor is intended to challenge someone to think critically or “push them into a realization that they have not kept up with the social group’s capacity for... adaptive change” (p. 514). Even within African American humor, superior humor is found when another African American “thinks too highly” of one’s self or of White skin (Levine 1977). The joke then turns into a lesson in pride and heritage correcting behaviors of self-doubt or extreme ego.

Black humor does not depend on the traditional joke form, but flourishes through “attitudinal and visual and depends on the verbal dexterity of the dozens, the toast, and the telling of “lies”, or stories (Carpio, 2010, p. 35). The dozens taken from the West African tradition of exchanging insults typically at the expense of women has been a

longstanding tradition for Black banter and can also be characterized as negatively aggressive (Brock 2011; Schechter 1970; Wald 2012). As Brock (2011) has noted, the dozens have transformed since its African origins but still remain a staple in Black culture. The custom was even picked up by mainstream media outlet MTV who produced the show “Yo’Mama,” where participants traded insults (MTV). Though the competitions were male dominated, Black women still participated in the trading of insults. As seen through writer Zora Neale Hurston and within the Black women’s blues traditions, women too practiced some form of the dozens. Though it may not have been called the dozens, Hurston specifically uses “ornately humorous insult customs” within her writings (Wald, 2012, p. 68). We later see this tradition surface again with Black standup comedienne Mo’Nique and Sommore as they use sexual humor as an entry point onto a male dominated platform. In their case, and the case for Black women humorists, superiority humor is an entry point to a larger audience. Once they have proven they are tough and can both, “dish it and take it,” they gain more respect on the stage.

Again, as seen through both the dozens and telling “lies” or signifying (Abrahams, 1975; Gates, 1988; Florini, 2014) the joke is usually on the other person or laughter is the result of someone else’s misfortune or self-deprecating humor. Stand-up comic, Kevin Hart, uses this idea in his show “Laugh at my pain” in which he makes light of many tribulations from death in the family to divorce. Through sharing these experiences of pain and finding ways to laugh in spite of them, Hart capitalizes on creating in-group relationships. Black women too laugh at and through pain. Superiority humor may be

used to lessen the effects of oppression by promoting high self-esteem through extreme boasting.

### **Incongruity**

At its core, humor, within the incongruity framework, is a consequence of the unexpected. Morreall (1983) defined incongruity as the “intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate” (p.15). Aristotle, attributed with examining, though not fully developing incongruity theory, argued that the element of surprise, “setting up a certain expectation in the audience and then jolting them with something they did not expect,” (Morreall 1983, p. 15) may incite laughter in an audience. Kant and Schopenhauer are attributed to incongruity as it is understood today (Palmer 1994). Both Kant and Schopenhauer agreed humor is found in the unexpected, however Kant too believed laughter was a result of emotional relapse (relief theory) while Schopenhauer believed, “we get something that we are not expecting... it completes the story or fits into the situation in some way—it just doesn’t fit in the expected or “normal” way” (Morreall 1983, p. 17). In other words, when a social norm or commonly held belief, is violated unexpectedly or surprisingly, humor may occur (Mayo 2010; Meyer 2000; Veatch, 1992).

Incongruent humor provides an inverted view of the world allowing the space to critique the world and the habits of mind that perpetuate commonly perceived social norms (Carpio, 2010). Chappelle uses humor to challenge stereotypical definitions of Black masculinity and respectability. Dave Chappelle regularly used incongruity humor on his self-titled, hit Comedy Central show, *The Chappelle Show*. The show was known

for crude, yet unapologetic racial humor where he regularly used the N-word pushing the censorship limits for network television. In the episode, “The Wayne Brady Sketch Show,” Dave Chappelle and Wayne Brady have an eventful night out. At the time of the show, Brady was known for his scandal free, clean-cut image and token-Black-comedian status on Drew Carey’s ABC show, *Whose Line is it Anyway*. Because Brady’s comedy was safe and family-friendly and Chappelle’s comedy was the complete opposite, this combination set the stage for incongruity humor. The sketch opens with Chappelle and Brady driving while discussing the importance of Black actors being united. The next scenes show Brady “acting as his true self” away from his clean television portrayal (Comedy Central, 2017) Brady initiates a drive-by shooting as Chappelle, sitting in the passenger seat, screams, “You got daytime Emmy N!#\$@. You ain’t supposed to be doing shit like this!” (Comedy Central, 2017). Brady’s kind demeanor changes as he intimidates Chappelle into not “snitching.” As they continue driving, Chappelle explains to Brady that he needs to get some money, to which Brady responds in a gentle nature, “I’ll get the money.” It turns out that Brady is also a pimp who needs to collect his money. As one of the ladies falls short, the camera pans into Brady’s face where he says, “Is Wayne Brandy gonna have to choke a b!@\$?” (Comedy Central, 2017). In these scenes, incongruity humor occurs when the audience, who is aware of Brady’s clean image, witnesses acts and language that work against their perceptions of him. The shock of seeing Brady act in seemingly uncharacteristic ways makes the audience laugh.

The challenge in clearly defining humor within these three frameworks is that rigid definitions fail to realize the social nuances within humor, yet most current humor

researchers rely on these classic and often dated understandings as the root of most humor studies. Therefore, while creating a foundational understanding of humor, I too draw on the generally accepted and widely read researchers. In reading, I found oftentimes these frameworks overlap depending on the situation and did not follow a rigid definition. As seen in the previous discussions of superiority and incongruity both frameworks have the ability to correct and critique social norms through different means, while humor within the relief framework eases the perceived aggressiveness of critique. In essence, a humorous situation can have the qualities of incongruence, superiority, and relief making it difficult to pinpoint a solid and universal definition or function of humor especially when studied in isolation. Because humor is a matter of taste, culture, custom, and experience, for many, there is no “line in the sand” in regard to how it is defined. Important to this study, however are not quite the definitions of humor, but its various social functions within a specific group, Black women age 30–39. Henri Bergson (2002) asserts, “To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine of its function, which is a social one” (p. 14). Although much of the literature on Black or African American humor details stand-up comedy, in “putting it [humor] back in its natural environment,” I examine everyday humor and the lessons Black millennial women learn through using and observing humor. Bergson (2002) discussed laughter as an echo or reverberation stating:

Still this reverberation cannot go on forever. It can travel within as wide a circle as you please; the circle remains, none the less, a closed one. Our laughter is always the laughter of a group...however spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary. (p. 13)

By understanding how humor works within and beyond these frameworks, I questioned if there are recognizable identifying marks for Black women's humor and contextualize the social functions and pedagogical properties of this brand on humor.

The idea of humor and its response, laughter, may be universal, however the context and historical implications that surround them are not. Like Black humor, other minoritized groups, use and understand humor in ways that also share humorous functions in relief, superiority, and incongruous frameworks. The following section seeks to insert literature on minority humor paying special attention to Jewish humor and women's humor.

### **Minoritized Humor**

For many minority groups in the United States, particularly, Muslim, Latino, and Asian Americans, humor is connected to both the lack of recognition and the trials endured while striving for American citizenship and acceptance by law and by custom. Michael (2013) argues that minority humor, especially in the stand-up tradition, is rooted in "a long history of using public humor to address and contest their terms of American social life" (p. 130). Michael (2013) analyzes Muslim American's humor as both a defense and a corrective mechanism. Muslim American comedians are using the comedic stage to challenge assumptions and correct the modern stereotypical portrayals of Muslim Americans after 9/11 as terrorists. In keeping with Michael's function of humor, comedienne Margaret Cho makes deliberate choices to use her Asian American identity to comment on the discrepancies of being an American. In a skit between a Black and a Korean store clerk, she draws on the physical and social stereotypes along with the



tensions between the two groups (Meyer, 2008). Realizing that the two minority groups need to unite with each other and not fight, she uses this moment to critique minority relationships in America arguing that the tensions between the groups are not necessarily with each other, but a result of a larger fight for American respect and recognition. These same themes manifest in Latino humor, Native American humor, and the humors of other White ethnicities as seen through immigration stories. Some researchers suggest ethnic humor continues to be a survival tactic for many ethnic groups including the many white ethnicities that immigrated to the United States (Juni & Katz, 2001; Whitfield, 2005). For example, there is an extensive amount of research on Jewish humor, while this is not the case for other white ethnicities. The Jewish comic tradition finds its roots within these characteristics and is often partnered with Black humor as key examples of ethnic humor.

### **Jewish Humor**

Jewish people's experiences are often compared to the experiences found within the Black experiences, as historically they are full of tales of displacement, extreme loss of life, and rebuilding. The Holocaust and the equally atrocious journey through the Middle passage, a chattel slave system, and a continuous fight for civil rights, proved to have lasting effects on these groups. In modern times, American Jewish humor stems from tales of immigration, and similar to the Black experience, reconciling ethnicity and American citizenship. Stereotyped as greedy, negative, and unfamiliar with American customs, Jewish Americans worked around and within these stereotypes reclaiming them through humor. In fact, Ravits (2000) argues that the surge of Jewish representation in stand-up comedy in the 1960's, through most notably Lenny Bruce, was because many

Jewish people were secure enough with their positions as Americans to now go back and reflect on their darker past. Jewish humor manifested in tones of self-mocking and arguably self-hatred when used within social circles. The more Jewish people fully assimilated into American culture, the more traditional Jewish customs were exploited, mocked, and ridiculed (Ben-Amos, 1973). In her analysis of the representations of Jewish mothers in comedy, Ravits (2000) claims the stereotypical image of the overbearing, guilt tripping, Jewish mother is a direct result of becoming an American. While gaining acceptance into American culture, Jewish folklore portrays the meddling Jewish mother characterized as caring, encouraging, and wanting nothing but the best for her child. After reaching success in America, these same traits were later exploited for mainstream comedic audiences and mocked for showing parts of the old customs. Her thick Yiddish accent and ability to remember the old world meant she was “not keep[ing] pace with the rapid assimilation and adaptation of Americanization” (Ravits, 2000, p. 6). The things that made her endearing become the things that made her a comedic target.

Ravits (2000) is not the only scholar to connect Jewish humor to acceptance into American society. Rosenberg and Shapiro argue that Jewish humor in the form of self-hatred, was developed when Jewish people left their own closed community and [integrated] into American life (as cited in Ben-Amos, 1973, p. 118). Just as seen in the image of the Jewish mother, those who were unable to shed their culture were mocked. Superiority humor, in this case Jewish humor mocking the old and the new, was needed to build confidence while going through Americanization, yet stilling keeping a small hold on Jewish traditions. Unfortunately, Humor and its connection to American

citizenship through custom and social norms is where commonalities between Jewish and Black humor part. Unlike other white ethnicities who were able to melt into American culture, skin color made this process difficult for Black people. For Jewish people, humor was a survival tactic and a coping mechanism needed for times of oppression. Superiority humor was used and needed to build confidence and maintain a small hold onto Jewish culture, while going through Americanization. Once the oppressive force lessened, humor returned to its place as entertainment (Boskin & Dorison, 1985). For Black people, oppression continued and in response to the inability to assimilate, humor remained both a coping mechanism and survival tactic.

Unlike other scholars, Ben-Amos (1973) does not believe in a strictly Jewish humor and most definitely not one of self-hatred. He argues that the idea is a myth and its characteristics would be like any other ethnic group. He states, “Jewish humor is not inherently Jewish anymore; it is not an expression of the postulated inheritance of psychic dispositions but a reflection of certain given socioeconomic environmental factors” (p. 117). He argues against the correlations between the evolution of Jewish humor and the ability to assimilate into American culture calling for a closer examination of the context surrounding Jewish humor by paying close attention to the community and the ways humor is received. For Black humor scholars, this analysis is beginning to take place. There may be a correlation between American mobility and the need for humor within the Black community. Again, out of the inability to gain full entry as American citizens, Boskin and Dorison (1985) argue, dark humor, double meanings, trickster tales,

and retaliatory jokes are distinct features of Black humor. Double meanings are also an important feature in women's humor.

### **Women's Humor**

Women, like other ethnic and racial groups, have been outsiders to dominant powers, yet they are different because they share close connections to these same powers. Walker (1988) argues, because White women are also members of the ruling class, their experiences cannot be perceived the same as other hypervisible minorities and do not share experiences such as "the almost total separations of the ghetto, the ethnic neighborhoods, or the barriers of skin color" (p. 103). Still, women have a unique sense of humor as a result of their minority status.

Women's humor has long been misunderstood following the stereotype that women do not have a sense of humor (Crawford, 1997; Khazan, 2015; McGhee, 1970; Russell, 2002; Walker, 1988). Women are to be supportive and submissive but not funny. Men are supposed to be funny and women are supposed to laugh or as McGhee (1979) says, "Men are expected to be the initiators of humour, women the responder" (p. 183). To better show the differences between men and women's humor, there are three distinctions, subject matter, form, and presentation of themes or messages (Barecca, 1991; Walker, 1988). In subject matter, women tend to joke about domestic life (home, church, and smaller social circles) while men joke about life outside the home (work/school, leisure activities). Though both men and women use many mediums to depict humor including, plays, stories, songs, and jokes, Walker (1988) argues, tall tales and political satires were exclusive to men in early humorist writings. As women gained

more political freedom, political satire increased (Russell, 2002; Walker, 1988).

However, understanding women's humor is more than listing the distinctions between men and women. Nancy Walker (1988) best outlines why women's humor exists and why it is worth studying arguing, women's humor lives in the tensions of maintaining gender roles, and women's humor shows the complexities of femininity and intellectualism. As Seethaler (2013) asserts, women make jokes about a world they do not inhabit; one that is not of their liking or their making. Therefore, women must make and find the humor despite stereotyping. Women are to be supportive and submissive but not funny.

Humor from women of color, including that of Black women, is missing in much of the literature. Though scholars like Barecca (1991) and Walker (1988) briefly mention Black women's contributions to humor, there is still much work to be done. By concentrating on Black women's humor, I hope to examine the sociohistorical implications of humor for Black women. The following section seeks to explore how the voices and experiences of Black women are discussed in conversations about humor.

### **Black Women Laugh Too: Locating Black Women and Black Feminist Thought**

#### **Within Humor and Humor Studies**

Comedy is a male-dominated field; therefore, the academic literature is also male dominated. Humor scholars such as Morreall (1983, 1987) and Palmer (1994) study the social and psychological factors within humor while scholars such as Schechter (1970) and Sterling (1965) specifically study Black humor concentrating on the history and subtleties of Black humor. Within most of the early literature, Black women are often

neglected as subjects from the research or relegated to smaller chapters in larger works. For example, in *The History of Negro Humor in America*, Schechter (1970) describes Black humor from the oral traditions of Africa before slavery through 1960. Although the majority of his examples discuss Black men, he does however, briefly mention comedienne Moms Mabley in the latter portion of the book when he examines the contemporary stand-up comedy tradition. Because Black women's humor is not easily recognized by white researchers making it invalid or nonexistent, there is a void in its study within academia. Black women are therefore silenced in the literature or pushed back and overshadowed by the humors of men and white women. As Dance (1998) asserts because a Black woman's humor is an in-group humor, to those outside looking in, humor and laughter may be seen as ordinary and thereby not worthy of study.

In more contemporary studies on humor, especially in the late 80's and 90's, there was an increase of women researchers within humor studies. Scholars, such as Walker (1988) and Barreca (1991), though not people of color, discuss the ways women in general use and understand humor. However, within their work, Black women are still a small part of the conversation. In Walker's (1988) work, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, Black women are only discussed in the chapter, "Humor of the 'Minority,'" where she uses the research of Black male voices such as Charles Chesnutt, Langston Hughes, and Lawrence Levine to discuss Black women's humor. This continues to be the trend in humor studies and demonstrates the need for current and consistent research on Black women's lived experiences as told by Black women.

Though not rooted in humor studies, there have been a few Black women who have intentionally studied Black women's humor. Daryl Cumber Dance (1998) focuses specifically on Black women's humor beyond the comedic stage rooting her anthology *Honey Hush!: An Anthology of African American Women's Humor*, to the folklore traditions of Black women's humor. Though Dance (1998) provides *examples* of Black women's humor through a variety of texts such as short stories, poems, and sayings, she does not provide a systematic analysis of Black women's humor describing *why* they are laughing. Also, within Folklore studies, DoVeanna Fulton (2004) studies comedy and in particular Moms Mabley who is often studied as the Black woman comedienne who broke race and gender barriers. As Fulton (2004) asserts:

Mabley situated herself in the position as mother, a safe and accepted role for women; however, her material dealt with sexual and political issues—issues unacceptable for women to discuss publicly. By creating a character that appeared nonthreatening, Mabley was able to subvert the gender constructs of the day. (p. 84)

Bambi Haggins (2007) seems to root her work within humor and television studies, however, she follows in the traditions of past literature typically focusing on the stand-up tradition. Unlike every day humor, stand-up comedy is more accessible to a larger audience because there is the expectation that there will be laughter. Audiences come to a stage performance ready to recognize verbal and nonverbal cues that signal when to laugh, making humor easier to recognize. In looking at the humor beyond the stage, in group communication patterns and verbal and nonverbal cues are harder to detect and therefore need to be decoded in order to find the humor.

Barreca (1991) connects culture and humor exclaiming that humor allows people, “to see a map of our culture; to focus on things we’ve seen but not necessarily processed or analyzed, explaining what we’ve sensed but not yet bothered to define” (p. 37). An analysis of Black women’s humor is less researched. Perhaps a Black women’s humor, is something we have seen and experienced, but “not yet defined” (Barreca, 1991, p. 37). In relation to Black women, humor theory gives voice to Black sensibilities, and Black women’s humor “develops as an interaction that in its implied normalcy, provides the daily context of value” (Taylor, 1994, p. 463). For Black women in particular, humor and laughter have deeper meanings than just mere entertainment, but humor may serve as a means of both survival and self-reflection. For the purpose of this study, I argue that humor is not only found on public stages as practiced and performed by professional comedians and heavily dissected in the literature. Instead, I investigated the humor that emerges spontaneously in a variety of settings by everyday people. This brand of humor is quick, unrehearsed, and based on a strong understanding of social norms and social cues.

Understanding Black women’s every day humor may help shift dominant narratives of Black women’s humor from that of mere jest, to a method for critically analyzing the social and cultural conditions with which Black women contend. Though the comedic stage is often rooted in real experiences, my purpose is to understand the ways Black women recognize humor not strictly as performative, as a means to “get laughs,” but as a way to look at the broader contexts in which Black women experience and contextualize their humor.



In Bambi Haggins' (2007) book, *Laughing Mad: The Black comic persona in post-soul America*, she outlines the trajectory of Black crossover comics Chris Rock, Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, and Dave Chappelle. She outlines the sociohistorical context behind this brand of humor offering a glimpse into why Black people were laughing. Haggins (2007) argues that the civil rights movement not only transformed Black thoughts and actions, but as it relates to humor, it changed the way Black comedy was delivered and received. Despite the differential treatment and psychological abuse, Black people still, managed to keep their sense of humor. Though not always on the stages, radios, or televisions, humor was found in the streets and in Black spaces such as beauty and barber shops, front porches, and in the home (Dance, 1998). Stand-up comedians reproduced and repackaged these jokes to suit the tastes of mainstream audiences. By the time the civil rights movements gained momentum, Black humorists could no longer mask their disappointment with society and became more outspoken in their humor as seen in the comedy of Dick Gregory (Haggins 2007). Watkins (1994) argues the perceived "new" assertiveness of Black public humor exposed what many Black people thought through the decades stating, "it was more a public unveiling of a covert or privately held sardonic view of America" (p. 462).

Unlike Watkins (1994) who gives a detailed catalogue of Black comedy, Haggins (2007) focuses on a specific group and thereby a specific brand of comedy, post-soul. Coined by George Nelson, the post soul era is the period after the civil rights and Black power movements (p. 4). Haggins (2007) cites Neal's description of the post-soul or "soul children" as the:

Black folks who came to maturity in the age of Reaganomics, and experiences the changes from urban industrialism to deindustrialism, from segregation to desegregation, from existential notions of blackness to metanarratives on blackness, without any nostalgic allegiances to the past... but in firm grasp of the existential concerns of this brave new world. (p. 4)

In choosing to focus on humor from the post-soul lens, Haggins (2007) acknowledges the differences in cultural practices and customs adapted by Black people as a result of their lived experiences during a post-soul time. Departing from Haggins' (2007), I argue that there has been yet another shift in representations of the Black condition. Though it may mirror that of the post-soul lens, for this project, I chose to examine the humor of older millennials, those who came of age during the millennial era. In particular, I want to focus on older Black millennial women ages 30–35 because they currently have a unique sociohistorical position and are using humor in innovative ways to better understand this position. The following sections provide a brief description of generational research defining who are millennials, outlining the sociohistorical events used to identify the millennial era, and beginning to describe intersections of race and age

### **Generational Research: Who are the American Millennials?**

Generational and age-based research provides a way to explore collective experiences within a specific demographic during a fixed time period. According to reports by the Pew Research Center (2015), age denotes two important characteristics, one's place in the life cycle and one's membership in a cohort of individuals born in a similar time frame. Generation members are the same age when social and technological changes occur (Kowske et al., 2010). According to the Pew Research Center (2015) as of 2015, the Millennial generation surpassed the Baby Boomers to become the largest

generation, however there are still many competing definitions about who exactly is a millennial. Some argue that the only definable generational group is the Baby Boomers because they have a specific and easily identifiable time period after WWII (Bump, 2014). Others argue there are seven generational groups each defined by events that reshaped social conditions (Debevec et al., 2013; Meredith & Schewe, 2002). The Pew Center determines that millennials are those born between the years 1981–1997 (Fry, 2016) while scholars Howe and Strauss (2000) determine millennials are those born in or after 1982. For this study, I will use the Pew Center’s determination of Millennials, those born between 1981–1997. Generational research is fluid and often challenging to conduct as depicted by the disagreements regarding when generations begin and end as well as what makes a significant event enough to define a generation. Though some characteristics may mirror or even overlap previous generations, the following section details a few identifying marks, values, and significant events within the millennial generation.

### **The Millennial Era: The Sociohistorical Context**

In much of the literature, millennials are characterized as one homogenous group sharing traits such as selfishness, entitlement, and success-driven while also being compassionate, adaptable, and savvy (Stein, 2013). As a group, they are observed as more affluent, and better educated (Pew Research Center 2014; Strauss & Howe, 2000). They are less involved in organized religion, marry at an older age, if at all, and have different political views from their parents (Pew Research Center, 2014; Rogowski & Cohen, 2014; Stein, 2013). Spanning the millennial generation, and in keeping with

generational researchers use of significant events as indicators of a generational group, there are several significant events that shaped the millennial era as seen in areas of technology, war and violence, economy, politics and public policy (see Figure 2; Debevec et al., 2013; Howe & Strass, 2000; Stein 2013,).

**Figure 2**

**Significant Events that Shaped the Millennial Era**

Significant events that shaped the Millennial Era			
<u>Technology</u>	<u>Politics/Public Policy</u>	<u>War and Violence</u>	<u>Economy</u>
The Real World airs on MTV giving rise to the modern reality TV era-1992	The Reagan, Bush, Clinton, W. Bush, and Obama Presidencies	Gulf War- 1992	“Reganomics”- 1980’s
The evolution of the internet-1993	Clinton’s Impeachment- 1998	La Riots-1992	Enron
Google founded- 1998	No Child left behind-2002	Oklahoma City Bombing-1996	Bankruptcy-2001
Y2K- 2000	Legalization of same sex marriage- 2004	Columbine High School shooting-1999	The Recession of 2007
Facebook arrives- 2004		Terrorist attacks on September 11 and war on terrorism-2001	
		DC sniper- 2002	
		Virginia Tech Shooting- 2006	

Though this list is not exhaustive and does not mention other significant events such as the OJ Simpson trial or Hurricane Katrina shaping both race and class relations, all of these events changed the way millennials looked at the world.

For older millennials, those who I characterize as born between 1981–1986 and are currently between the ages 30–36, many these events took place during their transformational middle and high school years. As they tried to balance hormones and

homework, these events played in the background in every adult conversation and on the television. I remember watching the 1998 Clinton impeachment trial in my Eighth-grade Social Studies course, but there was no conversation about why he was being impeached. We were old enough to watch trial, but not old enough for an explanation for what was happening and the events that led to the impeachment. So, during these times, we relied on the oftentimes inappropriate and misguided reasoning from peers who were also trying figure out the world. Phrases like “If it don’t fit, you must acquit” and “I didn’t have sexual relations with that woman” found their way into regular conversations beyond their original contexts. From Jay Leno and David Letterman, to *Saturday Night Live* and *Mad TV*, late night shows opened with humorous commentary on current events. These same late-night shows used humor to make people laugh in spite of tragedy as a way to escape the realities of the world. On a more serious note, I, along with many other older millennials, received my first cell phone after the 1999 Columbine shooting marking the beginning of heightened protection and security while promoting a strong cell phone culture. Though the older millennials share in witnessing many of these events first hand, their responses to them vary Based On Positionality.

### **Millennials: An Intersection of Race and Age**

Despite being born in the midst of, and coming of age during these events, some suggest that these events do not unite the millennial generation but creates separations within the group based on positionality. Age-based research highlights how or why individuals respond to certain events. Although one may belong to a generational cohort and go through shared experiences, *shared reactions* to these experiences are not always

present especially when differences in age, race, class, and gender occur. Debevec et al. (2013) suggest that millennials may be comprised of microgenerations<sup>6</sup> as a result in differences in age, race, gender and the like. For the purpose of my study, I want to focus on Black millennial women (race) between the ages of 30–36, who I consider older millennials (age), to explore if age and race influence the ways Black women contextualize humor.

According to the Black Youth Project (2014), a research initiative spearheaded by Professor Cathy Cohen, many Black millennials have different lived experiences from their counterparts. In their 2014 report, “Black millennials in America,” they highlight some of the differences. The report is comprised of three major parts: Lived Experiences (Economics, education, healthcare), Political Engagement and Attitude (Mobilization and voter turnout, Political engagement beyond voting, attitudes toward political and legal systems), and Support for Public Policies (Jobs and unemployment, reducing gun violence, health care and reform LGBT equality) (Rogowski & Cohen, 2014). The results of their work conclude that Young Black millennials ages 18–24, face unique challenges in employment, education, criminal justice, are politically engaged but need to be acknowledged to ensure participation, and have distinct opinions about current events including public policy, immigration and LGBT issues (Rogowski & Cohen, 2014, p. 6).

Marbley et al. (2007) report some of the challenges faced by Black millennials are the result of limited access and opportunity. Though younger millennials are

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<sup>6</sup> During this study what I call older millennial, is now defined as the microgeneration, xennials, those born in the late 1970’s to the early 1980’s.

characterized by their use and overuse of technology, for many Black millennials the digital divide still exists. For instance, while the millennial era showed an increase in home computers and internet access, as of 1998, Black millennials still lagged behind, “73% of European-American high school and college students owned a home computer, compared with only 32% of African American high school and college students” (Novak & Hoffman, as cited in Marbley, 2007, p. 13). While a recent Nielsen report (2016) states that Black millennials have closed the digital divide with the increase in mobile internet usage, older millennials remember the time when this access was not readily available.

In this study, I define older millennials as those born between 1981–1986. Despite the disagreements about when millennials are born, the fact remains that the millennial era, though large, still encompasses a wide range of ages and the definitions are changing almost daily. Younger millennials, characterized as those born after 1989 (Singal, 2017) share different experiences proving that as experiences change based on race, so too do experiences based on age. The difference in these years strongly impact how one relates to the significant millennial events previously mentioned and further demonstrate how millennials are not monolithic and should not be treated as such.

### **The Unique Position of the Older Black Millennial Woman and the Need for a Black Women’s Pedagogy Of Humor**

Black women, ages 30–36, are privileged to be recipients of the post-civil rights legislature of their mothers and yet like the majority of the millennial cohort, they are better educated and better able to adapt to an ever-changing world. Changes in education, technology, and increased recognition of harmful political mandates, shape the ways

older Black millennials view the world in ways that are different from their younger counterparts (Evan-Winters & Love, 2015). Older Black millennial women must reconcile age, race, and gender in multiple ways in addition to contending with navigating love and relationships, employment, and education. As Collins (2000) claims, Black women are often characterized by controlling or stereotypical images including the mammy, the matriarch, the jezebel, and the sapphire. The list of controlling images are not as clear cut as they once were, but they continue to manifest in new ways leaving deep wounds in Black women. For example, the older millennial women, though not a mammy in the historical sense, where she is preoccupied with and takes extreme delight in catering to and caring for her White superiors, may be considered a mammy by profession. For some African American women within education, it is this notion of care and nurturing that is easily exploited. Black women have long held the responsibility of taking care of others and putting themselves last. Doing so in the workplace is no different as Shewanee D. Howard-Baptiste (2014) describes “Mammy Moments” within higher education as working and even slaving for the profession.

The mammy trope is not the only one that deeply affects older Black millennial women. The Black superwoman or strong Black woman tropes impact how older Black millennials navigate the world. Though in many ways they are similar to their mothers and grandmothers, they have subtle differences that signal a need for intervention. Millennials are known to be ambitious, driven, and anxious about the future (Howe & Strass, 2000). To deal with the pressure to succeed and be better than their mothers, many take on the strong Black women trope. Though it seems that taking on a strong Black



superwoman persona may be empowering, demonstrating that she does not depend on anyone and she can take care of herself, it is this very thing that causes many Black women to become overwhelmed and overworked (Collins, 2000; Harris-Perry, 2011; Lewis et al., 2013). This superwoman persona falls in line with many narratives that describe the Black woman as resilient and able to take on the burdens of all people. Unfortunately, this hinders the Black woman's ability to show vulnerability and ask for help when needed.

Harris-Perry (2011) argues that Black women live in a crooked room in which they must negotiate the ways they are perceived and how they perceive themselves:

When they confront race and gender stereotypes, Black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some Black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion... it can be hard to stand up straight in a crooked room. (p. 29)

For many older millennial women, this room can be suffocating as it houses complex images and unrealistic expectations that are magnified by popular culture. According to Love (2012; see also Evan-Winters & Love, 2015), Black women, and I contend, older Black millennial women, are shaped by more than history. Though they are shaped by contemporary and problematic images of Black women found within hip hop culture and popular media, more insidiously they are shaped by myths of brokenness (Winfrey-Harris, 2015) as demonstrated by today's media overload. Older Black millennial women are bombarded with conflicting representations of themselves, especially on television.

Beretta Smith-Shomade (2002) provides a historical analysis of Black women on television. From Diahann Carroll's 1968 role as Julia, the first Black woman on

television not to be portrayed as a domestic worker, to more contemporary Black television shows like *Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *Living Single*, and *Moesha*, Smith-Shomade analyzes these sitcoms paying close attention to the ways Black women are seen in work roles, general characterization, and social class. Because of the increase in Black representation on television during the 1990's, Smith-Shomade (2002) examines popular shows from this time. Older Black millennial women grew up with these shows witnessing more of themselves on the small screen. Though Black people as a whole saw increased representation in television, this did not mean Black women were portrayed any differently than in previous years. The women on these 90's shows, with the exceptions of *Living Single* and *Moesha*, offer one-dimensional portrayals of Black womanhood that fit neatly into the sitcom formula, strong characters, predictable humor, and a return to normalcy (Smith-Shomade, 2002, p. 22). Older Black millennial women came of age with *Moesha*, played by teen singer turned actress, Brandy Norwood. Together, *Moesha* and older Black millennial women, navigated high school and then college. As the audiences grew, the sitcom began to lose some of its appeal, and was quickly replaced by the oversaturation of the 2000's reality television era.

With the increase in reality television and in turn reality television celebrities, these shows altered reality for Black women once again. Though many understood that the "reality" in reality television was in fact scripted, for others reality television meant easier entry to becoming a celebrity and a return to the caricatures from the turn of the century. Black reality television—such as Bravo's *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and Vh1's *Love & Hip Hop* and *Basketball Wives*—were preoccupied with Black women.

They were smart, they were loud, they were passionate, but most importantly they were entertaining. Though some argue that these reality shows provide another dimension to Black women on television and a Black aesthetic (Warner, 2015) most argue that reality television shows do more harm than good reinforcing the very stereotypes women have fought against (Goldman, 2016). Despite being in a “crooked room” where they bend and tilt under various pressures, what stops these women from breaking or fracturing pieces of themselves? Humor allows Black women to gain their footing as they contort through life as they decipher alternative depictions of Blackness.

### **Finding Humorous Possibilities Through Pedagogical Practices: Critical Pedagogy and Humor**

Critical pedagogy is rooted in liberation within the classroom. Attributed to Paulo Freire, and his work with adult learners in Brazil, critical pedagogy attempts to transform education away from ineffective methods of instruction and toward a deeper examination of the implications of education and classrooms. Freire (2000) encourages an intentional problem-posing education where education becomes a joint responsibility liberating both teachers and students.

In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (p. 83)

If humor is connected to the way Black women understand themselves and the world around them, then humor may serve to liberate Black women from the mental effects of oppressive conditions. While humor as a problem-posing strategy may open up the space

for Black women to understand their existence, it is not without its limitations and the potential to be misread and misused. Despite this, humor is still a valid and valuable strategy in understanding the ways Black women are in a constant state of becoming. Just as Freire argues that people, and in turn problem-posing education is a process of becoming, so too is humor and its uses for Black women.

Freire understood the importance of laughter as a part of critical pedagogy. In conversation with Myles Horton (1990), Freire says, “It’s necessary to laugh with the people because if we don’t do that we cannot learn from the people, and in not learning from the people we cannot teach them” (p. 239). Yet there is no extensive literature on the direct connections between humor and critical pedagogy (Hunt-Barron & Hartsell, 2017). Cris Mayo (2008) attempts to close this gap by examining the Black humor traditions, double speech and signifyin,’ within Black queer drag and camp making the argument that ‘Black signifying pedagogies’ and ‘humor’s meta- and indirect pedagogies’ provide a way to critique and in turn understand the world. For Mayo, humor provides a way to rejuvenate social justice education offering an alternative way to examine the world. Tyson (2010) extends Mayo’s (2008) work by making a more explicit connection to critical pedagogy and humor by appropriating Freire’s discussion on critical consciousness arguing that laughter enables us to better understand the “aesthetics of critical pedagogy” (p. 635).

Hunt-Barron and Hartsell (2017) assert the need for laughter where developing a sense of humor is inherent to critical consciousness. By “learning to laugh in a particular manner,” (p. 167), students are better able to “engage in a problem-posing education.”

Lewis (2010) uses Freire's (1998) definitions of naïve consciousness, superstitious consciousness, and critical consciousness as a framework to make a case for 'critical laughter.' Naïve consciousness is superficial and characterized by "an unreflecting acceptance of the inevitability of the world" (p. 18). As it relates to laughter, one with a naïve consciousness will laugh for laughter's sake. The laughter is individualistic and selfish, becoming "a pure positivity without any critical capacity... conjuring [sic] away that pain of exploitation... helping [sic] us 'laugh it off'" or "just relax" (Lewis, 2010, p. 639). To connect with the earlier discussion on the traditional humor frameworks, this type of laughter is associated with relief humor where humor and in turn laughter, is a coping mechanism.

Superstitious consciousness, though slightly more critical, is characterized as being aware of social relations but feeling hopeless under its power. Laughter here is associated with cynicism and isolation and much like a naïve consciousness, the results are temporary. As Lewis (2010) claims, laughter "becomes a substitute for political action, a cathartic moment of release that simultaneously affirms one's superiority over the system while also indexing one's complacency with this modicum of reassurance" (p. 640). Humor, dark and disparaging in particular, relates to the superiority theory and its recognition of, and complacency with, social hierarchies. Because one acknowledges these hierarchies he or she is only able to joke about them and not able to change the social condition that creates the need for the joke. As a result, the joke gives a temporary sense of relief and a temporary sense of moral superiority as one acquiesces to oppressive conditions.

Critical consciousness provides a more nuanced way to see the world and promotes action as a result. One who has a critical consciousness finds the balance between a naïve and superstitious consciousness recognizing naivety as an entry point to understanding the world and superstition as the process of reframing and refining such understandings. According to Lewis (2010):

Critical laughter is transformative and revolutionary. It is on the side of a rupture with society's norms, principles, and ways of life by opening up a new logic of action for which we do not yet have words... [it] is collectively curious about the world and the division that separate the oppressed from the oppressors. (p. 640)

Though Lewis (2010) is describing the literal act of laughing, these same sentiments can be applied to humor, or what is causing the laughter. In this case, humor has a transformative quality that too can rupture norms. I argue that humor is “the new logic of action” and by understanding humor from a Black woman’s perspective, it provides an alternative way of viewing the world. In order to do this, humor should not solely be examined in isolation (in the classroom, in the workforce, on the comedic stage), but examined in everyday life. Critical pedagogy provided research for understanding power and equity, providing the language to identify and describe the oppressive norms demonstrated in Issa Rae’s *Insecure* and through the discussions within the focus group.

### **Conclusion**

As demonstrated, there were several pieces or bodies of work I needed to research as a way to better understand Black women’s humor. All of these pieces served different functions to my academic puzzle. Some pieces clarified information and outlined terms such as the sections on humor theories, generational research, and Black performance

studies. Other pieces served as a rationale for why Black women's humor is needed as seen in the sections minority humor, and Black women laugh too. And last, the sections older millennial humor, and finding humorous possibilities through critical pedagogies, provided bodies of work where I make critical arguments surrounding the function of humor and establishing a Black women's pedagogy of humor (BWPH). All of these pieces are reflected throughout the project but in particular in Chapter IV and V as I analyze the data and outline BWPH.

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY, METHODS, AND DESIGN

Within academic scholarship, Black women are often silenced within the research or exploited in the name of research. When Black women are found in the literature, they are often described through the “focus on future absence, not present presence... significant as negative numbers” (Dillard, as cited in Casey, 1993, p. 108). As Ann Duccille (1994) observed in *The Occult of true Black womanhood: Critical demeanor and Black feminist studies*, Black women are often the subjects of academic study, or as Taylor (2013) explained, “She [Black women] may have occasion to hear herself described, damned, redeemed, belittled, or exalted” (p. 48), but often are not recognized for taking an active part in studying themselves. As a Black woman researcher, my goal was to keep Black women at the center of the research study highlighting the complexity of Black culture, specifically humor, through a Black feminist lens. Because some research traditions fail to notice the validity of cultural and ethnic differences, this study took on the larger challenge of making connections between Black women’s lived experiences and humor as told through their own voices. To that end, the following research questions informed this study:

1. What is a Black woman’s pedagogy of humor (BWPH)?
2. How does a BWPH demonstrate the ways Black women are public pedagogues?



To explore the nuances of Black women's humor, I used basic qualitative research methods. Qualitative research assists in exploring the social world and aid in verifying the discoveries (Patton, 1990; Mason, 2002). Denzin and Lincoln (1993) explain qualitative research as a way to "study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them" (p. 3). Therefore, a qualitative study, using textual analysis and focus group data, allowed me to explore the everyday social world as discovered through observations and experiences (Barbour, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 1993; Mason, 2002; Patton, 1990). As Wolcott argues, "Culture is revealed through discerning patterns of socially shared behavior" (p.71). Within this study, culture has several layers. I draw on Black culture, and by extension Black women's culture, and Black millennial culture. Because I argue that humor is a "socially shared behavior" (Wolcott, 2008) presented and (re)presented differently based on culture, qualitative methods allowed me to trace these elements and investigate their interrelatedness in hope of identifying and better understanding Black women's humor. To examine this, I used, four episodes of Issa Rae's HBO series *Insecure*, and two focus groups comprised of five participants including myself.<sup>7</sup> The following sections outline textual analysis and focus group research as my primary data collection method as well as the ways textual analysis was used to analyze both the television episodes and the focus group data.

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<sup>7</sup> As outlined by Adler and Adler (1987), I am a complete member researcher one who is already a member of the study group (Black woman and between the ages 30–39) and completely engaged in the research activities, namely as researcher, facilitator, and participant of the focus group. This is discussed more fully in my positionality and ethics statement.

## Textual Analysis

Textual analysis helps to illuminate ways language and symbols are used to gain information on how people make sense of life and lived experiences (McKee, 2003). According to Bertrand and Hughes (2005) textual analysis focuses on “discovering the explicit (surface/ denotative) meaning of the text, or the latent (underlying/connotative) meaning” (p. 195). This research method is often concerned with describing content, functions, and messages within a text. Within this method, a text is anything written, visual, or recorded that can produce meaning and is found through various mediums including books, historical artifacts, social media, and television. Because of the interpretive nature of the study, conducting a textual analysis of HBO comedy series *Insecure* provided a more systematic approach to watching and analyzing the television series. *Insecure*, created by Issa Rae and Larry Wilmore, chronicles the lives of two Black women in their late 20’s. Rae, the writer, the creator, and the star of the show, “follows a millennial’s journey through life in south Los Angeles, California” (Holmes, 2016) as she navigates love and dating, friendships, the workplace, and even herself. Jenna Wortham (2015) of the New York Times describes Rae’s writing strength as, “the ability to wring comedy out of the peculiarity of the Black experience in America.” Inspired by the comedy of Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld, she prides herself in finding humor in the awkwardness of everyday life (Rae, 2016). Rae<sup>8</sup> is defined as an older Black millennial woman between the age 30–39, the age range of the women selected for

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<sup>8</sup> Issa is also the name of her character in *Insecure*. When discussing Issa Rae as show creator, I will use Rae. When discussing her character in the show, I will use her first name Issa.

the study. Because she writes about the transitions into Black womanhood and depicts the nuances of Black womanhood through humor, her show provided a platform to analyze a Black woman's pedagogy of humor as well as provide a compliment to the focus group and framework for the ways a Black women's pedagogy of humor is enacted in everyday life. Research in textual analysis recognizes and celebrates multiple interpretations of a text and is used to differentiate how viewers see media as a way to impact and construct various meanings. Because I argue that *Insecure* uses humor to help viewers make sense of the world, textual analysis as a research method best aligned with this study.

To observe how humor is used within *Insecure*, or more importantly investigate how the show uses humor to portray the experiences of older Black millennial women, I used textual analysis to “establish recurrent patterns of behavior [humor] within a television program” (Bertrand & Hughes, 2005, p. 48). In the preliminary viewing, I watched the entire season of the show taking notes on everything I found important including one-liners, topics, and demonstrations of popular culture (memes, music, fashion) as represented earlier in the discussion on Rae and older Black millennial humor. Though this seemed haphazard and unfocused, it was in this process that I realized, in keeping Black women at the center of the research, I wanted to focus specifically on the episodes written and directed by Black women. Doing this narrowed the sample from the overwhelming eight 30-minute episodes, to a more manageable four episodes. The following episodes (1, 2, 3, & 8) were selected and used for this study

## **Episode 1**

“Insecure as F!@#” (written by Issa Rae and Larry Wilmore and directed by Melina Matsoukas): In the inaugural episode, Issa,<sup>9</sup> turns 29. She is unhappy with her relationship with her unemployed boyfriend Lawrence, and her job status as the only Black person in the non-profit organization, “We Got Ya’ll”. Her best friend, Molly, is struggling in her single life and balancing her life as a lawyer in an all-white law firm.

## **Episode 2**

“Messy as F!@#” (written by Issa Rae and directed by Cecile Emeke): After a night out, Issa decides she wants to be more assertive and take more chances at work and in love. After the night out as seen in episode one, she decides to stay with Molly for a few days as she avoids Lawrence. Preoccupied with her personal life, she is unprepared for a work presentation and struggles to propose a youth outing sponsored by “We Got Ya’ll.” Molly continues to date various men.

## **Episode 3**

“Racist as F!@#” (written by Dayna Lynne North and directed by Melina Matsoukas): Issa finally comes home to confront Lawrence and the two begin to feel the distance. Issa and Molly deal with racial politics in the workplace. Issa’s coworkers talk about her youth program behind her back. While at the law firm, Molly attempts to reach out to the new young Black intern coaching her how to “switch it up” (codeswitch) in the office.

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<sup>9</sup> Issa is also the name of the character in the show. For clarity, when discussing the television character, I will use Issa, and when discussing Issa Rae as writer and creator, I will use Rae.

## Episode 8

“Broken as F!@#” (written by Issa Rae and directed by Melina Matsoukas): In this season finale, nothing is going right for Issa. Lawrence leaves Issa after finding out that she slept with her ex-boyfriend Daniel and she is no longer speaking to her best friend Molly. Although at odds, the two still go on their friend Kellie’s birthday trip to Malibu. Molly and Issa make up during the trip when Issa defends Molly as Kellie and Tiffany make fun of her about her relationship choices. Molly drives Issa back home to discover that Lawrence has moved out of their apartment leaving his key behind.

Throughout these episodes, the women used humor as they dealt with work relations, sexual politics, misadventures in dating, building and maintaining friendships, and many other issues. The episodes had realistic plot lines that were ripe for observing Black women’s everyday humor. More importantly, in thinking ahead to the focus group, the content was relatable to the older Black millennial women. Textual analysis became helpful in keeping me open and flexible to the television data. I was able to better watch the show with a more objective outlook with my research questions in mind. With this in mind, data collection and data analysis of *Insecure* happened simultaneously. The following paragraphs outline the data collections and analysis methods for *Insecure*.

### **Data Collection and Analysis for *Insecure***

To collect and analyze data for *Insecure*, I used elements of Saldaña’s (2009) cycle method or what I call viewing rounds. In the first round<sup>10</sup> of viewings, I watched

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<sup>10</sup> In each round of viewings, I watched each episode at least three times. Once for general impression, once for explicit connection to humor (use and function according to humor theories), and once for

each episode for overall content including a basic impression of larger topics. I also created preliminary questions for the focus group as referenced in Table 1.

**Table 1**

**Notes from the First Round of Viewing**

<b>Episode titles</b>	<b>Major topics discussed/ observed</b>	<b>Possible focus group questions</b>
Insecure as F**K	<p>Job satisfaction Growing older (change in fashion, what to do with life)</p> <p>Dating (interracial, standards, contact with ex, finding love) Singleness Building and maintaining friendship</p> <p>Employment woes Tokenism</p> <p>Sexual Politics (“Broken pussy”)</p> <p>Communication skills (Molly and Issa v. Issa and Lawrence)</p>	<p>What does it mean to be insecure and how is it shown in the episode?</p> <p>Issa and Molly are the main characters, which do you relate to?</p> <p>How does Rae use monologues to create humor?</p> <p>Which monologue do you connect with from the episode?</p> <p>How is friendship regarded in this episode?</p> <p>How would you describe Issa and Molly’s friendship?</p>
Messy as F**k	<p>Being unafraid to live life Privacy Sexual politics</p> <p>Woes in Dating (unsatisfied in relationships, finding a relationship, dating apps)</p> <p>Changing identities (codeswitching)</p>	<p>Describe a time where you felt like Issa or Molly in the workplace?</p> <p>How would you respond to Issa’s coworkers? Was there a time you felt unprepared for a work meeting?</p>

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character nuances as they related to humor (who is the topic of humor? How does humor function in the friend group) (McKee, 2003)

	<p>Being taken for granted at work and at home</p> <p>Workplace (finding a job, finding a place/role in a current job, finding joy in working)</p> <p>Avoiding responsibility</p>	<p>Is Issa irresponsible and how does she use humor to mask this?</p>
Racist as F**k	<p>Workplace (being taken seriously, coworkers doubt abilities)</p> <p>Dating (Black men with degrees in dating=difficult, location in dating)</p> <p>Romantic relationships Friendships Double standards (black and white pay, perceptions in being college educated)</p> <p>Being supportive in relationships (romantic and friendship)</p> <p>Social class distinctions in friendship (Tiffany and Molly = cultured, same sorority, Fendi shoes)</p>	<p>Was there a time you had to bite your tongue in the workplace?</p> <p>Are there rules for working with white people when you are the only person of color at your job?</p> <p>What is your reaction to Rasheeda the law intern? What would you have done if you were Molly checking on the intern?</p>
Broken as F**k	<p>Dealing with a breakup (how to get over it, dealing with the reality of not being together)</p> <p>Showing remorse Dating/Singleness</p> <p>Tensions in Friendship (being judgmental, defending each other, living up to expectations)</p> <p>Sexual politics (promiscuity v. embracing sexuality)</p>	<p>How is the humor in this episode used differently than in the previous episodes?</p> <p>Why doesn't Issa tell the girls about the breakup?</p> <p>Describe the ways Issa and Lawrence deal with the breakup?</p>

	Black girls travel (Kellie's birthday trip)	
	Workplace environment (Lawrence)	

In the second round of viewings, I observed how topics such as the workplace and relationships evolved and were repeated throughout the episodes. Through initial coding or first impression coding (Saldaña, 2009), I began mapping the topics in more detail. As seen in Table 2, I was able to take large topics, such as the “workplace” and break them down into smaller, more detailed units such as” working while Black.” These smaller units aided in a more focused viewing for the next round and served as the basis for identifying categories, codes, and subcodes (Saldaña, 2009) that later became prominent themes for this portion of the study. In this round of viewing, I also began tracking how humor was used in the episodes and in particular, how humor was delivered. Though this was the process for each episode, the chart below is a sample of this mapping using episode three “Racist as F\*\*k.”

**Table 2**

**Notes from Second Round of Viewing**

<b>Topics discussed (detailed)</b>	<b>Humorous scenes and one liners</b>	<b>Delivery and function of humor</b>
<b>Workplace</b> <i>a. Patience with job</i> <i>b. Working while Black</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Questions from White folks (fact checking, microaggression)</li> <li>Code switching</li> </ol>	<b>Workplace</b> During Issa's presentation the coworkers disagree with her project. “Maybe we should have them watch Lemonade and go to	Facial expressions Voice inflection Slapstick Vulgarity



<p>3. Emotions/ actions</p> <p>4. Expectations from white counterparts</p> <p>(Issa v. Molly)</p> <p><b>Dating</b></p> <p>a. Singleness</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. LA dating (west coast v. east coast dating)</li> <li>2. Dating apps The League dating app; vetted men</li> <li>3. Unclear communication and mixed signals (Molly and Jared and Issa and Lawrence)</li> </ol> <p>b. Reasons why it's hard to date Black women (male perspective)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Quick to write off all Black men</li> <li>2. desperate to date</li> <li>3. Black women are difficult</li> <li>4. Be grateful to have a man</li> <li>5. Black men only want sex</li> <li>6. Men don't like control "too difficult to date" "controlling"</li> </ol> <p>c. Reasons it's hard to date (women)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. prized possessions"</li> <li>2. "Very important and very pretentious. They act like women should be in line..."</li> <li>3. "Every dude model wants or actress"</li> </ol>	<p>Lemonade and eat soul food"</p> <p>"you just got the big white guy bonus"-Molly</p> <p>"They're having secret white meetings and they're sending secret white emails. I make one mistake during my presentation and they lost all faith in me. Now I'm the Black girl that f'ed up. White people F'up all the time they did say ish to Caleb when they made them make them puppets... it's not fair" -Issa</p> <p>"We are in mixed company and a positive attitude can go a long way" (signal to act right in front of white people) -Issa</p> <p><b>Dating</b></p> <p>"Just because we have standards does not mean we are difficult"-Molly</p> <p>"once they get a degree they turn into nigga-est of niggas"</p>	<p>Parody</p> <p><b>Humor as:</b></p> <p>Coping mechanism</p> <p>Superiority (too good for coworkers,</p> <p>To critique friends, significant others</p> <p>To deliver news (good or bad)</p>
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<p>d. In relationship (Issa and Lawrence)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Poor communication</li> <li>2. Unsatisfied in the relationship</li> <li>3. Not paying attention to each other</li> <li>4. Support/expectations</li> <li>5. <b>Burden of support</b> (Issa feels the pressure) “It’s hard to carry the emotional weight and the financial weight</li> </ol> <p><b>Friendship</b></p> <p>a. With Frieda (work relationship)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of trust</li> <li>2. Frieda’s apologetic nature</li> <li>3. Communication patterns Careful speech/polite speech</li> </ol> <p>b. With Black friends</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Honest talk</li> <li>2. Critical humor; talking about each other</li> <li>3. Support even when disagree (loyalty)</li> </ol>		
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The third round of viewings, focused on the various functions of humor as outlined by the classic humor theories found in the existing research (coping strategy, breaking the ice) (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). In reviewing all the charts and a result of this mapping, workplace relations, trials in dating, and markers of friendship were the most prominent themes based on the frequency they were discussed, and the methods used to discuss them (connection to humor). As I prepared for the focus groups, I kept these

preliminary themes in mind and used the focus group as a litmus test to check my textual analysis for bias and accuracy. Therefore, the data collected through textual analysis of *Insecure* in conjunction with the two focus groups informed each other. My analysis of the episodes provided the questions for the focus groups as well as offered preliminary codes for data analysis.

### **Focus Groups**

Hatch (2002) argues that although there are advantages and disadvantages to focus group research, it is an effective way to explore varying perspectives from a specific group or surrounding specific topics as a method to capture the dynamics of the group interaction. Because humor can be communal and works best when there is an audience, conducting focus groups served as another way to examine how Black women create, respond to, and understand humor. According to David Morgan (1997), “The hallmark of focus group research is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (p. 2). Conducting these focus groups served three functions. It allowed the participants to consider their own experiences and emotions while in a group setting (Patton, 1990), extended my analysis of the television show, and served as member checks to verify my analysis of the show in addition to extending the research data.

As most focus group research suggested, a group of 6–12 participants was ideal for an effective focus group (Glesne, 2011; Hatch, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morgan, 1997; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Patton, 1990). For the scope of this study, I feared that 12 participants would hinder the study making it difficult for the women to expressive

themselves comfortably. In addition to this, a large group posed logistical concerns such as where to hold the focus groups and how to manage schedules for 12 individuals. I solicited six Black women within my own social network conducting what Glesne (2011) refers to as “backyard research.” Though Glesne (2011) admonishes that this “backyard research” method should be used only if there is no other way to find participants, in recognizing that a collective Black women’s consciousness exists and keeping in line with my Black feminist theoretical framework (Collins, 2002), I encouraged and celebrated the bonds within my familiar networks demonstrating purposeful sampling (Patton 1990); therefore, the criteria for my participants were loose. I only asked that they identify themselves as Black women between ages 30–36. I identified those in my immediate friend circle who matched the criteria and personally asked each woman if they would participate. In choosing my own friend group, I used the same recruitment script for each participant (Appendix A). One of the women felt her close friend may also provide good insights and asked if she could participate in the project, however due to scheduling conflicts, she was unable to participate. Of the seven women initially contacted, only four women participated in the final study due to various scheduling conflicts. The final participants completed a Doodle poll based on their availability. The date and time was chosen based on the date and time all participants could attend and because of this, scheduling the first focus group took about a month. The final group was comprised of five women including myself. Here is a brief description of each participant:

- **Erica, single age 33:** I held many roles within this study namely, researcher, facilitator, and focus group participant. In the friend group, I am known for my ability to make people comfortable through laughter, while at the same time using the laughter to soften hard truths. I hold a master's degree in English and African American literature and I currently work for a small private university.
- **Zora<sup>11</sup>, in a relationship, age 36:** I met her working for a popular restaurant chain where we were the only two Black women on the staff. She was my second friend in a new state and has been one of my closest friends ever since. She is exact and expressive; known for her quick wit and sharp tongue. She is precise with her words using their double and sometimes triple meanings. She holds a master's degree in Literacy education. While working on her PhD, she also works as an administrator for a local school district.
- **Angie, in a relationship, age 36:** We initially met while working for a Historically Black University; I was her employer, and we became fast friends. She is also known for her precise and polished language even when upset. The ultimate code switcher, she is unapologetically Black and ambitious, unapologetically Black woman centered, and unapologetically academic. She has a master's degree in English and African American Literature and a second master's degree in African American studies. She currently works at a large southern university.

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<sup>11</sup> To keep their identity anonymous, the names have been changed. IRB approved consent forms are in appendix B

- **Maya, in a relationship, age 33:** Maya and I met in while completing coursework in our respective master's programs. Though we did not know each other well then, after graduation, we reconnected while doing other educational work. Maya's sweet personality coupled with her polite "shade" as she tells stories, highlight the ways that voice inflection is a key part of a Black woman's humor. She has a Master of Science in Education degree and she currently works as a middle school teaching coach.
- **Jessie, single, age 34:** We met through a mutual friend while attending a religious convention and she quickly became family. Though at times she was the quietest in the group, she expressed herself through a hardy laugh and the occasional southern drawl. She graduated from a state community college, and she currently works for a popular banking company in their corporate location.

Because I was familiar with these women, there was a certain level of trust and mutual respect in place that allowed me more time to obtain detailed information and less time finding ways to build trust. As a collective, this group represented a small sample of Black women within Rae's viewing demographic and in many ways mirrored the lives of the main characters. They had varying educational levels, relationship statuses, and employment. Each woman also knew of and watched *Insecure* before the study. Because of this, each woman was excited to talk about the show in a focus group setting.

I conducted two focus groups called 'Den Dialogues.' The Den Dialogues took place between my apartment living room and my apartment clubhouse living room.

Gillota (2013) argued that Black communal spaces were important to African American

humor as settings where it could be practiced; therefore, the setting aided in fostering an environment where the women could be comfortable enough to participate and to express themselves in a comfortable, familiar environment. In the location, there was one television centered in the middle of the room and the women were able to lounge comfortably on oversized chairs and couches.

I conducted two focus group sessions. The first session was 3.5 hours long and the second session was 5 hours long. Morgan (1997) suggested focus groups be more than 2 hours long depending on the activities. Because of the group tasks outlined below, when considering their participation, each woman was asked to set aside a minimum of 2 hours for the focus groups in expectation that the group may last at least 5 hours. This may seem like a long time to conduct a focus group, however, in keeping with my Black feminist framework and in particular the “use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims” (Collins, 2002), the focus group needed to be substantial to capture Black women’s dialogue. A focus group this long also allowed time for watching and discussing two episodes of *Insecure*. The women were all familiar with *Insecure* and were able to speak at length in detail about the show. By the time we met as a group, *Insecure* season two was just beginning; the focus groups gave the women the chance to review the first season again. During the first Den Dialogue, I collected consent forms and the women were introduced to each other. I explained my research in layman’s terms outlining the tasks for the sessions as described below:

1. Journaling: Each woman was given a small journal that I kept at the end of each session. At the beginning and the end of the sessions, I allotted 30 minutes to

write their reactions to the episode and how they saw humor in the episode (Appendix C), however the women usually finished within 15–20 minutes. They were also encouraged to take notes on the episodes, jotting down reactions or topics they would like to address in the group. This information was also considered data and analyzed alongside the focus group transcriptions.

2. Viewing the selected episodes of *Insecure*: In each session we watched two episodes of *Insecure* (each approximately 30 minutes long). Session one focused on episodes 1, “Insecure as F\*\*k,” and 2, “Messy as F\*\*k,” while session two focused on episodes 3, “Racist as F\*\*k,” and 8, “Broken as F\*\*k”.
3. Discussion: After viewing the chosen episodes, I facilitated a semi-structured discussion of the episodes and the connections to my research question. In the first session, the discussion opened with the women sharing their initial impressions and reactions to the episodes. The discussion moved to my prepared questions from the textual analysis of *Insecure* and IRB approved focus group protocol (Appendix D). For the second focus group, the discussions started with a recap of session one including follow-up questions from the previous session. We then moved to viewing the selected episodes, journaling, and considering the questions from the IRB protocol and my textual analysis of the show.

By using focus groups, I was afforded the opportunity to both hear and see the ways humor was performed and understood by these Black women. Hatch (2002) admonishes against video recording focus group sessions because of potential confidentiality concerns. With the women’s permission, I video recorded the sessions to



capture moments of humor found in nonverbal cues. As Richardson (2002) explains, “African American females communicate through storytelling, conscious manipulation of silence and speech, code/style shifting, and signifying among other verbal and nonverbal practices” (p. 680). Both video and audio recording the sessions better ensured that I accurately captured the women’s reflections. This also made the task of transcribing the data easier because I was able to take more observational notes during the focus group. I was able to have a more meaningful dialogue and be a more active participant. In my notes, I observed the women’s reactions while they were watching the television episodes highlighting places where all the women laughed, or topics that produced strong reactions. I was later able to insert these descriptions into the transcriptions. As a participant, I was considered a part of the in-group and able to understand many of the nonverbal and inaudible reactions to the episodes. However, as facilitator, I made sure to ask the women to verbalize what they meant in those moments to be sure that I conveyed their expressions accurately.

Because I did not want to lose the women’s voices, speech patterns, and the nuances of humor, I manually transcribed the focus group conversations immediately after the sessions, by first listening to the audio recordings of the group, then by following along with the video recording to capture accuracy and non-verbal cues including expressive hand movements and facial expressions. I made notes to indicate voice inflections and nonverbal cues in italics and noted when the women were laughing individually or by themselves. During this time, I noticed I was conducting preliminary data analysis as I transcribed each session. Although each woman was given a copy of the

completed transcripts after the session was completed to read through for accuracy and corrections, only one woman provided feedback clarifying one of her statements. Once the adjustments were made, I printed the transcripts for my data analysis.

The beauty and the difficulty in working with people is that they can be unpredictable. I was diligent in the ways I protected the participants not only because they were my friends and I had a personal investment in their well-being, but because they were volunteering to be vulnerable and this was not taken lightly. Though I had the women's permission to record, some in the group were still uneasy with this process and continued to make small remarks throughout the session including, "Is this still on?" and "Don't transcribe this part!" I continued to explain the reasons why they were being recorded and reinsured them of the procedures in place to keep the records private and secure. Although they were not in any physical danger, it was my goal as a researcher to lessen any emotional harm they may experience. Because I encouraged storytelling, some stories included traumatic events or other triggering topics. I continuously asked their permission to use the information discussed and to ask more probing follow-up questions when needed.

### ***Focus Group Dynamics***

The women in the group had distinct personalities, but generally worked well together. Although each woman had a personal relationship with me, the Den dialogue session was the first time all the women were in a room together. Session one was filled with more silence as the women established trust with each other. They politely answered each question, but often did not elaborate on their responses. In this session, I needed to

draw out the participants more through more clarification questions. In session two, the women were more comfortable. Not only did they answer my questions, but they also gave more detailed responses and asked questions of each other. Session two centered on explicitly defining and understanding Black women's humor. In their discussion, they demonstrated the ways a Black women's collective consciousness does not always mean complete agreement. Recognizing a Black collective consciousness recognizes the ways Black women share similar experiences but acknowledge space for varying understandings of the experiences. In defining how a Black women's humor functions, the answers varied and at times created tense moments namely when one participant was hesitant to answer questions specifically oriented around Black women's humor. The interaction between women was not hostile, but the room was heavy with silence as everyone thought through the alternative perspective she offered. Each participant was able to speak openly and as the research suggests, they moved through the tension with humor and affirmations of their own experiences.

### ***Focus Group Data Analysis***

To review and analyze the data, I began with the same textual analysis approach used for watching *Insecure*. Because of the amount of data gathered and because there were so many moving parts to the study, the thought of analyzing the focus group against the television data quickly became overwhelming. Not only was I analyzing the focus group for topics/ themes as demonstrated with *Insecure*, but I also needed to analyze the data for its explicit connections to humor both in function and in method. In my first

reading<sup>12</sup> of the transcripts, I read for general impressions highlighting what I thought were important quotations and repeated topics. Once I had a clear sense of the data, I referred back to my textual analysis charts from *Insecure* and began taking the most prominent themes from (workplace, friendship, humor) and reading the transcripts to see how they were also discussed during the dialogue through initial coding (Saldaña, 2009).

In the second round of reading the transcripts, I used In Vivo coding to read the transcript for how the individual voices discussed the subjects from the initial coding. According to Hatch (2002), In Vivo coding assists in capturing the voices of the folk or indigenous terms, therefore this was a way for me to capture the women's voices, "attributed to such features as impacting nouns, action-oriented verbs, evocative word choices, clever or ironic phrases" (p. 75). I observed repeating methods of communication that were prominent in the research on Black speech patterns; for example, telling stories, and using voice inflection. The results of this coding later identified specific humor techniques (recreating alternate endings, and repeating phrases), helping me to begin identifying examples of Black women's humor. The most prominent and shared subject matters were then coded and became the major themes for the study.

### **Positionality, Trust, and Ethics**

Within this study I was both the researcher and a participant and therefore I worked hard to keep a "balance grounded in awareness" (Brock, 2019). As researcher, I needed to fully acknowledge my own biases and in particular my preexisting views on

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<sup>12</sup> Just as when watching *Insecure* I viewed the show in rounds, I used reading rounds to assist in analyzing the focus group data.

Black women and humor. Based on my upbringing, Black women and humor are intrinsically linked. This is not to say that all Black women are comedians or even humorists, but I came to this study believing that there was something more to Black women's laughter than it just being a byproduct of trauma. I saw this as I observed Black women exchange looks in grocery stores and laugh at the events that may have occurred or as they celebrated other Black women with a laugh and a coded, "I see you!" Because humor is not only subjective, but it is coded, I observed and learned these codes early in life. Conducting this study meant that as a researcher conducting research on my own community, there were times when I used what Spivak (1998) coined, "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, as cited in Phillips, 2010) or making temporary generalizations about a group identity in order to create political or social change. Although Black people are not monolithic, many Black people relate to or share common lived experiences. I suggest that for Black women, humor in its many forms, is shared even though within the group, it may be experienced differently. I remained transparent about these ideas with the women in the group as I outlined the purpose of my project. During the data collection phase, I kept this in mind while watching *Insecure*. As a researcher, it was easy for me to fall into the trap of knowing what I loved about the television show and making premature conclusions about the data. I did not shy away from these, but instead I made note of these moments in a separate journal to share during the focus group during my role as participant.

I considered myself a study participant that held an important insider prospective. Because of my position as a Black woman within the age limits of the study, I was better

able to relate to *Insecure* and the older Black millennial demographic. I remained cognizant of the personal relationships I had with each participant and my position as friend. To lessen ethical dilemmas surrounding trust and confidentiality, I established a working relationship “predicated on trust, care and a sense of collaboration” (Glesne, 2011, p. 171). My position as friend came with many assumptions and responsibilities based on my own reputation. Each woman trusted me and therefore felt they could trust those in the group. It was my responsibility to ensure that each person felt safe in the group. Again, I had prior relationships with the women, but they did not all know each other. Within the Den Dialogue, I heard new stories from each woman about various experiences that they had not shared previously in our private conversations. To further establish trust, I reminded the women that because I was studying Black women’s humor, everything was considered and would be captured through video and audio recording. During the focus group I asked the women about their feelings when difficult topics arose and gave them the option to share as little or as much detail when telling their stories keeping in mind that everything was recorded. Because the group established a strong rapport through laughing and being together, they all felt comfortable enough to share. Each woman received a copy of the focus group transcripts and preliminary analysis chapters, taking full advantage of their roles as collaborators. The women were able to reflect and critique both my interpretations and their portrayal creating a sense of collaboration.

### **Limitations to the Study**

As a Black woman, I recognize I have insider status to the study group and share many common experiences and perspectives with the women. My membership in this group has impacted every part of the study from the initial inquiry rooted in my own experiences and observations of other Black women, to the research questions, participants, and my interpretation of the data collected. Because of this, I needed to constantly reflect on the goals of this project. Was I capturing the women in authentic ways? I needed to ask myself: Was I projecting my thoughts onto the group? However, using a Black woman-centered framework, I have confidence that other researchers would also come to the same interpretations.

A second limitation to the study was my relationship to the participants. Deciding to use my own friendship circle through purposeful sampling, posed some challenges. On one hand, I did not have to waste time building rapport, and the women were eager and accommodating to the time needed to participate in the study. Because of these prior relationships, I knew the types of questions and conversations the women would respond to. On the other hand, because of my familiarity with them, I continually needed to remind myself to push back on certain words and phrases and not fill in the gaps as I normally would. Instead of actually knowing what they meant, when using the phrase, “You know what I mean?” I needed to be diligent and ask for clarification. In transcribing the first focus group conversation, I was able to catch the places I did not ask follow-up questions and I was able to correct this in the second session by opening the

session with those questions. If there were questions from the last group, I was able to easily contact the participant for clarification.

As demonstrated in this chapter, the women, those in *Insecure* as well as the women in the den, used humor to discuss a variety of subjects including the workplace and friendship. As hooks (1993) asserts, “We express a lot of our negative thinking in humorous vernacular speech. It often has a quality of magic and sassiness that comforts. It’s tied up with our sense of being able to look on the rough side and laugh” (p. 62). Key distinctions in speech patterns, choral speech and narrative sequencing were prominent in the group and connected to two important functions of Black women’s humor, softening the blow and coping with others, and creating bonds.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter was the groundwork of the study. Because there is no specific body of work that discusses how to conduct research on Black women’s humor specifically; I was tasked with creating a way to study this phenomenon. Using textual analysis as both a data collection and data analysis method complemented a Black feminist framework because it provided space to observe and acknowledge Black women’s intellectual contributions through Issa Rae’s *Insecure* and focus groups. I have weaved together pieces of material, “research strategies from a variety of disciplines” (Steinberg, 2012), to create and inform the whole, my study. In like manner, I weaved together pieces of traditional academia with various subjective knowledges (Collins, 2002). My needle is threaded with a Black women’s pedagogy of humor.



The following chapter, Chapter IV, I will lay out the themes found on both *Insecure* and in the Den dialogue and begin to fuse together the women's voices found in within *Insecure* and the den dialogue focus group in addition to the existing research. The chapter outlines the most prominent themes found in both data sets, whiteness in the workplace, interracial allies and friendship, depictions of Black women and Black women friendships on television as outlined by the textual analysis. It is important to understand the nuances of Black women's humor in context therefore the chapter ends with the theme Performances of Black women's speech, in which I explicitly begin to define Black women's humor and provide specific examples of this humor as witnessed in the den dialogue. Chapter V theorizes a Black women's pedagogy of humor with consideration of both its strengths and limitations and its connections to public pedagogy.

## CHAPTER IV

### DEN DIALOGUES: BLACK WOMEN'S CONVERSATIONS ABOUT *INSECURE*

It is often inappropriate to compare people to animals and yet, I am drawn to the lioness. In a pride, the lioness is the hunter, and the pride's survival is dependent upon what she finds. She is a mysterious creature and like the Black woman, her characteristics are laden with contradictions. The Black woman, like a lioness, can be cunning, regal, elegant, yet, vulnerable and nurturing. For as much as both are elegant, they can be vicious when provoked. For these reasons both are misunderstood, underestimated, and admired. In their den they can find solace. This place is home. This place is protected. This place is theirs.

Through coding *Insecure*, reading existing research on Black women, and coding the conversations from the den dialogues, this chapter showcases the prominent themes that emerged, encounters with whiteness, authentic depictions of Black women in life and on the small screen, and performances of Black speech. As discussed in the previous chapter, the subject for the den dialogues took place around the pre-selected episodes of *Insecure*. Because the episodes contained storylines around the workplace, dating and relationships, and friendship it made sense that the focus group conversations discussed these subjects in detail. The information presented in this chapter is arranged thematically. For each theme, I begin with an analysis on how it is reflected within *Insecure* by extracting scenes from the episodes and providing a discussion of those

scenes. I then analyze scenes from the den dialogue where the den participants, Angie, Jessie, Maya, and Zora, discuss their personal experiences and reflect on *Insecure*. The conversations were transcribed verbatim and, as seen in the later discussion on Black women's speech, are vital in understanding Black women's humor.

### **Encounters with Whiteness: "They Just Don't Get It!"**

The workplace is a place of tension not because one must perform tasks, but one must perform tasks, but one must also contend with other emotional stressors. Bell and Nkomo (2001) argue that for Black women, there is not only a glass ceiling, but a "sticky floor" that manifests itself in the form of racism and sexism. In this case, intersectionality aids in exposing the compounding challenges that many Black women face in the workplace. Within *Insecure*, Rae portrays this "sticky floor" through main characters Issa and Molly.

Issa works for the non-profit organization "We got Ya'll" "an award winning after school multidisciplinary program for underserved middle school and high school students" (We got ya'll, 2018). Issa and her work partner Frieda are a part of the youth liaison team where they are responsible for creating and implementing youth programming at Thomas Jefferson Middle School. Although she is not the only person of color, she is the only Black woman in the organization. Molly is a third-year associate at a nameless law firm. Though she is not the only person of color at the firm, she is the only Black woman. This token status puts them both in vulnerable positions making them both invisible and hypervisible. They must negotiate performances of power as well as microaggressions through identity shifting, not only changing how one speaks, but

changing ones overall presentation of self whether consciously or subconsciously, (Dickens & Chavez, 2017; Dickens et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2012) all while combating racial and gendered stereotypes. Episode three, “Racist as F\*\*k,” shows the ways both Issa and Molly negotiate their positions of power and work through microaggressions in the workplace. In this episode, Issa takes the lead on a youth project. On her way into the lunchroom, she overhears the rest of her team discussing her youth project with Frieda:

Issa: Hey, were you guys just discussing beach day?

Frieda: Oh it’s no big deal we were just talking and a few of the others had some concerns.

Issa: And they were concerns that they couldn’t talk to me about?

Frieda: I’m sure they could’ve, but they just emailed me to double check a couple little things.

Issa: So there were emails too? I wasn’t CC’d.

Frieda: Oh. They didn’t want to seem like they were questioning your judgement. But they weren’t sure how you’d react. But everyone knows this is your event and I assured them that you have everything covered. You’re like a toupee. *[awkward silence]* I’ll see you later *[Frieda rushes out of the lunchroom]*. (Lynne-North & Rae, 2016)

In this conversation, Issa feels undermined by her team. Her position of power is threatened because according to her team, she does not have power; they do not view her as the authority, therefore shifting the power to Frieda. Frieda seems aware that there is a problem with the conversation, yet indirectly defends the team’s actions by diminishing their disrespect with phrases like, “it’s not a big deal” and “everyone knows this is your event and I assured them that you have everything covered.” These phrases further

undermine Issa's authority and passively dismisses the groups wrongful actions. Though Issa bites her tongue at work, she is able to express her true feelings with her boyfriend Lawrence:

Issa: They're having secret white meetings and they're sending secret white emails. I made one mistake during my presentation and they lost all faith in me! You know now I'm the Black girl who fucked up. And white people at my job fuck up all the time! They didn't say shit to Caleb when he had the kids make those racist puppets. Where those emails? I didn't get shit in my inbox!

Lawrence: Did you talk to Joanne [Issa's boss] about it?

Issa: No cause then I look too sensitive. So fucking unfair!

Lawrence: I know, but hey you just gotta work extra hard to prove them wrong. (Lynne-North, & Rae, 2016).

Here, Issa comments on the racial double standards in the workplace and her lack of options in correcting the situation. Because Black women are *racially* stereotyped as loud and aggressive, she knows that she could not have a negative reaction. Doing so would feed into Frieda's comment, "they weren't sure how you'd react." Yet, because of the *gendered* stereotype of women being emotional and overly sensitive, she also feels she cannot stand up for herself for fear of "being too sensitive." Unfortunately the result is the perception that she is ineffective in the workplace. While watching the episode, dialogue participant Angie's reaction best captures the feeling in the room as she says,

It didn't even make me angry as much as it made me sad because of the familiarity. I also sympathize with Issa in that episode because she had to temper her reactions to bigotry in the name of professionalism. I was instantly exhausted for her.

Molly too, is having her own trials at work. In the same episode, we discover one of the new summer associates is a Black woman named Rasheeda who does not shift her identity. In a conversation with her, Molly attempts to help by giving some advice on better fitting in at the firm:

Molly: Hey Rasheeda, hi, can you come in here for a second?

Rasheeda: Ooh girl of course. (*Talking to a colleague in the hall*) Boy you bet not eat my soup! (*walks into Molly's office*)

Molly: I just wanted to check in, see how things were going

Rasheeda: Girl, I'm good thanks

Molly: Good cause you know, I just wanna make sure that no one gets the wrong impression of you

Rasheeda: Um, why would they? Mark said I was doing great.

Molly: Yeah and you are. It's just, sometimes you can be a little.... Girl you know how these white people are. If you wanna be successful here, you got to know when to switch it up a little bit.

Rasheeda: (*exhales*) Hmmm. I appreciate your feedback.

Molly: Good

Rasheeda: But I didn't switch it up in my interview with the senior partners and I didn't switch it up when I was named editor of the law review, so I don't think I *need* to switch it up now. But thank you so much. (Lynne-North & Rae, 2016)

In this instance, Molly holds a position of power in knowing and understanding the law firm's culture. Molly knows that by identity shifting in the workplace, she will be more readily accepted and taken more seriously by the senior partners. Unfortunately,

Rasheeda does not listen to Molly and, as seen in a later episode, pulled into a meeting with the senior partners where the audience can assume she is being fired.

Zora: Didn't the Black girl from the show get fired at one point. The one Molly tried to help?

Erica: In episode 5, the boss wants Molly to talk to Rasheeda

Zora: yes

Erica: and Molly is like, "I don't know if I want to do that" and that's not her job.

Angie: It was really awkward

Erica: I felt bad because Molly was trying to help this girl

Angie: she was trying to help her on the low like help her like a Black woman

Erica: Like Black girls do

Jessie: And she was looking all sad when they were putting that hammer down on her and she was looking at Molly like....

Erica: help me!

Angie: And Molly is like "Bitch I tried!"

Rasheeda's credibility, like Molly's, is not only rooted in her professional performance and ability to complete work tasks, but also in the ability to perform professionalism.

Rasheeda is a high performing rising lawyer, but she is unable to perform corporate professionalism as demonstrated by the unwritten laws of the firm namely stripping overt Black signifiers such as speech pattern and adopt "standard" speech patterns and mannerisms. Molly is a more seasoned lawyer who knows the rules of the law firm and in many ways has adopted the standards of professionalism. In the scene, Molly represents

respectability as seen through her straighter hair and standard language. Rasheeda on the other hand, challenges the legitimacy of such unspoken rules by choosing not identity shifting. Her hair is natural, and she uses her natural speech. It can be argued that Rae is intentional in her writing choices and wants the audience to also question the legitimacy of professional performances. She does this through Rasheeda's response to Molly, "But I didn't switch it up in my interview with the senior partners and I didn't switch it up when I was named editor of the law review, so I don't think I *need* to switch it up now." This quotation is both a critique of Molly's own perception of professionalism, the need to change or shift, and Rasheeda's own naivety. Rasheeda was more than capable of doing her job, as seen when she lists her experiences, but Molly's experience has taught her that being qualified, and a strong worker is only part of being successful in the law firm. Within the Den Dialogue, the women also find the workplace a place of tension. The conversation about identity shifting and code switching in the workplace spurs lively discussion within the focus group.

### **"Ya'll Don't Want all my Black Self like for Real!"**

After watching the conversation with Molly and Rasheeda, the women reflected on their own experiences in the workplace where they are the only Black women. For these Black women, code switching, changing language patterns, and in turn identity shifting has been ingrained into their lived experiences. They recognize the ways in which how they present themselves matter in the workplace. In efforts to increase diversity and awareness of social issues, some places of employment institute special programming to make the workplace comfortable for all their employees.



Jessie: I work at popular bank so at work they have this big thing where they want you to bring yourself, bring your whole self to work. I'm like ya'll don't want all my Black self. Like for real for real.

*Room laughs*

But like with the whole codeswitching thing and how they want you to be able to be your full self, come to work with your full self.

Erica: what does that mean come with your full self?

Jessie: Like be able to talk about...Like we have these meetings called Courageous Conversations where they want to have... yeah girl. They have like legit meetings and panels about this. Courageous Conversations.

Zora: We have conversations about race and equity at work in our meetings because we're trying to raise awareness for people but when we have them you can tell that they don't... it's not clicking.

While making concerted efforts to improve race relations in the workplace seem like a good idea on the surface, for these Black women it seems that it only adds to the workplace frustrations further pushing them not to act like one self or "bring one's whole self to work." Zora and the other women repeat the phrase "they don't get it" and "it doesn't click" when discussing their white counterparts which for them begs the question, how can one "bring the whole self to work" when most at the workplace will not get it or not understand the nuance in their presentation? In this way, DuBoisian double consciousness, understanding the twoness of being African American is frustrating and causes anxiety. The women understand that their presentations are conscious choices. Zora admits she has become more vocal in the workplace about race and race relations expressing that at times she chooses not to identity shift. The excerpt that follows demonstrates what bringing one's whole self to work looks like for her.

Zora: I find myself sometimes... I've started sometimes saying things out loud now like I have to catch myself. Like I walked into the office the other day and two of my white counterparts were in there and I was like, "What y'all doing?" They were like "solving the world's problems" and I just started laughing.

*Room laughs*

Zora: They're like "what are you laughing for?" and I was like "nothing. I probably shouldn't say it out loud." He was like, "No say it!" and I said, "Well it's racially charged so I should probably keep it to myself"

*Room laughs*

Zora: And he's like "no just say it!" and I said, "well honestly, I was thinking seeing as how y'all cause all the world's problems..."

Erica: Bloop

Zora: (*matter of factly*) y'all *should* be the ones sitting here trying to solve them.

Jessie: well I mean alright! I don't think he was ready for that!

*Room laughs*

Zora: Right. He wasn't! Lol he was not ready at all

Angie: yeah that was uncomfortable the fact that you said that in public space, but I also stood for it

Jessie: Like I wish I could have been there. I wasn't mad at it

Angie: Yooo I wanted to be there so bad. I feel like I missed a part of history.

Erica: don't ask questions you don't want answers to is the lesson I got!

Angie: That was also Jessie's fault cause. It ain't like they were talking to her. They were just having their private white moment in public space but you know. She [Zora] came in and was like oh, (*room laughs*) and then he said what do you think? And she said "such and such and such and such" Ma'am it wasn't your conversation to being with!

*Rooms laughs*

Zora: so I was just like (*sigh*) I don't know if this made me more frustrated or if it felt good to be able to say it out loud.

For Zora, bringing her whole self means not biting her tongue or hiding her emotions.

Though the women laugh at her account both out of disbelief of her complete honesty in mixed company, and out of sheer entertainment, together they are ultimately questioning the purpose of identity shifting wondering who is it really for? How can they shift their identity and still maintain their complete selves? As Zora ends her story, she claims “it felt good” even in that moment to take off her performance of professionalism and to just be.

### **“Your Allyship has to Show Up Even When I’m Sleeping!”: Perceptions of Interracial Allyship**

Though *Insecure* is a Black-centered television program, it is not void of white characters. Both Molly and Issa have white workmates. Unlike Molly however, Issa and her coworker Frieda work closely together and form a workplace friendship. As Briggs (2007) points out, there is a difference between being friendly toward someone and having a close personal friend. Within *Insecure*, interracial relationships are friendly as seen with Issa and Frieda, but relationships with other Black people are portrayed as close and personal as seen with Molly and Issa’s relationship. The women within the dialogue further make this distinction saying the phrase, “your actual friend” to denote a difference in the perception of friendship and the reality of a “real” friendship.

Though Frieda tries to cultivate a deeper friendship, Issa is reluctant. After working a successful event and in a planning session for the next, Frieda gives a toast

saying, “To finally hanging out and I mean you know, who knows? Maybe one day, we can go out like real friends?” Although both women chuckle, they do so for very different reasons; Frieda in a chuckle of uncertainty and even embarrassment at saying her private thoughts aloud and Issa in discomfort knowing that they would never be more than work friends. These same sentiments are shared among the women in the den. As demonstrated by Issa and Frieda, there is a certain responsibility involved in being in friendship with Black women that include mutual respect and loyalty. As with any friend, when there is no trust, there is no true friendship. Perhaps Issa does not trust Frieda because she did not stand up for her when her other teammates questioned her work ethic. As Zora says, “I didn’t care for the fact that Issa’s partner [Frieda] did not put a stop to it. I know she eventually apologized, but I still feel like I wouldn’t be able to trust her or that she was on my team.” Within the den dialogue, the women discuss these responsibilities further. Between episodes, Zora and Angie have a conversation about their mutual friend Leslie and her friend Michelle,<sup>13</sup> who happens to be white. In the following account, the women discuss the way Leslie was mistreated by Michelle.

Erica: I think you were discussing what happened with your friend and you said it didn’t surprise you that your friend [who is black] was treated this way. Is it the same in friendships with white women?

Zora: yeah she was really pissed off by the whole thing.

Angie: Meanwhile no love lost on your end because you already knew her whiteness was showing

Zora: right cause her whiteness been peeping out okay?

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<sup>13</sup> The names have been changed to keep their anonymity

In this instance, when Angie says, “you already knew her whiteness was showing,” she is confirming why Zora was hesitant about her friend’s close relationship with a white woman. As McKinney (2006) argues, whiteness is a stored identity that is not taught, but learned through stories and personal experiences. This is also true of the perceptions of whiteness that are observed by people of color. Because Angie and Zora share similar experiences with white women, “her whiteness was showing,” was both an acknowledgement of a shared experience and a warning for the group to be cautious in these relationships. The story continues:

Angie: That’s messed up. That’s also your friend and that’s like your *actual* friend.

Zora: She calls her, her best friend and I was just like she ain’t looking out for nobody!

Angie: but I mean, it also... it’s hurtful white people don’t look out.. they don’t mind looking out for each other. In my estimation she doesn’t...

Zora: She doesn’t show up

Angie: She doesn’t. Which means in my opinion and this is probably overly deductive or whatever, she’s not a good person (*matter of factly and with a shoulder shrug*)

Maya: Nice.

*Room laughs*

Erica: shut up (*laughing*)

Angie: I appreciate that

Jessie: I mean you just have to keep it real

Angie: Sometimes you have to call a thing a thing.

Jessie: She's just not a good person. Cause it is what it is

Zora: You have to show up for people when it matters

Jessie: that's true

Angie: Especially and this is probably bad, but if you're white and you're in an interracial friendship you got to show up even more! Your allyship has to show up even when I'm sleeping!

Room: mmm hmmm

Angie: Because if I wake up and you're no longer... like if I had trouble in my dream with a racial issue and you're not there beside me that's God telling me something. He's like speaking to me.

Jessie: I was in this march and you went there!!

*Room laughing*

The women are critical of the interracial friendship portrayed in Zora's story commenting on the lack of loyalty, "not showing up," or "not looking out" for people of color. Here Zora is hurt because her friend was hurt, but more importantly the experiences reaffirmed a common experience when dealing with interracial friendships. This mistrust of those in interracial friendships also manifest even when one is a self-proclaimed ally as told by Angie as she tells about an experience one of her students had during the school year:

Angie: one of the said white girls who is a graduate student she said, remember when I told you she said to the Black girl, I don't like you doing Black stuff.

Jessie: I can't believe she said that out loud

Angie: so then she tells said Black girl, but she waits until they get in the elevator by themselves, and she says "listen, I'm going to have to be honest like I feel like you're able to talk about something I'm not able to talk about [Blackness]", so she gon say to the girl I really just feel like really overwhelmed by it.

*Room collectively rolls eyes*

Angie: She was like but sense I know the weaponizing of white women's tears, I'm not going to cry. I refuse to actually cry because I know how white women use their tears.

Erica: she better manipulate being white and woke! How do you manipulate being woke?

Zora: you're like bringing it up!

Angie: that's the same thing...

The group in unison: AS CRYING!

Zora: I won't let the tears fall, but know they're brimming!

Angie (*sarcastically*): but also, just know I'm not letting them fall because I'm woke as hell like because I know how you Black women feel about my whiteness

Jessie: (*disgusted*) how did you look at her?

*Room laughs*

Angie: This wasn't me, but the student later tells me, she's like Dr. what should I say about Blah blah blah? I was like "you know," cause when I talk to Black women students I sometimes am a little more honest than necessary. So I was like, "first of all this is dumb shit."

Maya: right.

Angie: "and I feel like you should just tell her to kiss your whole ass"

Erica: oh my, not all of it.

*Room giggles*

Angie: and like (*laughing*). She was like, "I don't want to say it like that." I was like "listen, if you're going to be friends with white people, you need to be able to check white people. If you can't check white people, then you can't be a good friend. And if she can't receive the correction, then she can't be a good friend"

Gaysi Lake (2019) writer for *The Black Youth Project* argues, “In a reality where whiteness affords you the luxury of choosing whether or not to leverage your privilege and be revered uncritically, despite glaring flaws, Blackness can never flourish.” As Angie’s white student manipulates her position as a self-proclaimed ally, she further demonstrates why some Black women are leery of friendships with white women. Though the women mock the student in a more critical humor, they recognize the work involved in maintaining interracial relationships agreeing with Angie as she exclaims in her advice to her student:

If you’re going to be friends with white people, you need to be able to check white people. If you can’t check white people, then *you* can’t be a good friend. And if she can’t receive the correction, then *she* can’t be a good friend.

Yet despite being cautious of some white women, and hyperbolically and figuratively “throwing the whole white person away” when they are not being loyal or supportive, these women still celebrate the white women who are good allies and support their Black friends as seen when Jessie tells the story about one of her good white friends deciding who was going to be a part of her vow renewal:

Jessie: So you know her husband is mixed and he was like have whoever you want in the wedding; it’s all about you. I wasn’t going to be in it at first because her sister in law needed to be it so she didn’t have enough room. So she was like, I really want all of my girls. Like these are the girls I grew up with and I love her (the sister in law) but...

Angie: I don’t love her like I love them!

Jessie: Right! And so she put me in there!

*Room laughs*



Zora: It matters though. It does say something because she could have very easily just like kept his sister

Angie: right to make people comfortable. We saw how that worked with ol' girl. But also like for me things like that matter. It isn't just me showing up for you right

Jessie: Right. Like in that situation I was okay cause I was like "that's your sister in law, that's your brother's wife."

Angie: I wouldn't have been okay. We been ridin' since were three

Jessie: laughing

Zora: Yeah cause all the other ones were going to be in it and you were going to be the only one...

Jessie: yeah

Zora: mmm hmmm she did good.

Jessie: she did.

Zora: you might have a good white one.

*Room laughs*

Maya: They are hard to come by (*looking up, searching into the distance*)

Angie: They are...

Jessie: she's the only one (*laughing*)

### **Authentic Depictions of Black Women in Life and on the Small Screen**

This section takes a step back from the actual episodes and focuses more on the women's reactions to Rae's creative decisions and how successful she is in her efforts to expand depictions of Black women. Rae was disappointed in the lack of complex Black women in television. Calling the late 90's and early 2000's the prime of Black television,

with shows from *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*, *Moesha*, *Living Single*, *Girlfriends*, *Martin*, *Half and Half* and many more, there was a moment of silence for Black characters in the years after. This silence is indicative of the shift from sitcoms and other scripted television, shows to the fast fashion of television, reality television. Michelle Conlin (2015) describes reality television as “fast, cheap, and addictive” (as cited in Ward, 2015). Early reality television shows such as *The Real World* did not feature many Black women (13 Black women over its 33 seasons) but as years progressed and reality grew beyond its 15 minutes of fame, Black culture and Black women in particular became a focal point of reality television. This shift was not positive for Black women and has instead proved to be the platform for Black women behaving “badly” providing a breeding ground for exploitation as seen in shows such as Vh1’s *Love and Hip Hop* and *Basketball Wives* franchises, Bravo’s *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, and Oxygen’s *Bad Girls Club*. According to Monica Wynn (2015), “television viewers have been inundated with negative depictions of Black women camouflaged by modern day versions of the same stereotypical images (p. 103). Perhaps this is the reason why many Black women have a complicated relationship with reality television. Rae’s *Insecure* signals yet another shift, one that brings back the Black sitcom and offers an expanded view of Black women on television one celebrating the normalcy of being a Black woman.

## **“I Feel Seen but in a Good Way”: Rae’s Reception, Relatability, and Balancing Reality Television Depictions of Blackness**

Upon its airing, *Insecure* received positive reviews attributed to her fresh portrayal of Black women. For Black women in particular, it became the topic of conversation everywhere. Jessie recalls having group discussions on her lunch break after every episode:

Maya: I feel seen but in a good way!

Jessie: Right! Sometimes you’ll watch shows that were written by a white person but it has a black cast and they’re having to explain the reason why they’re doing this or doing that.

Maya: You can just automatically relate to this show

Jessie: yeah!

Maya: Like this is just what black women... this is what we do! This is what we go through. This is our experience. This is just us.

Zora: I think what makes it funny and humorous is that it is so realistic and relatable because you can relate to it and although it may not be something you would personally do, you probably know a Black woman who would do it!

Angie: I feel instantly like both comradery and awkwardness but I also feel like there are various moments... what I like about her most is that she depicts these other moments of Black womanhood and awkwardness that we don’t get particularly awkwardness.

Though the subject matters were no different than other sitcoms, Rae was able to center Blackness without being a stereotypical “Black show” and answered Wynn’s (2015) call for a balanced, more nuanced depiction of Black women. Rae is able to use the crude, hypersexual elements of girl talk and fuse them with the seemingly competing portrayal

of an insecure woman as demonstrated when over dinner Molly shares why she is distraught over her inability to keep a man:

Molly: It's like it doesn't matter what I do Issa. If I'm into them then I'm too smothering. If I take my time and try to give them space, "oh I didn't think you were into me." Fine. Sex right away. Lose interest. Wait to have sex. Lose interest. If I don't have sex at all... Motherfucker no! I'm a grown-ass woman. I did not sign up for that bullshit (sigh).

Issa: I think your pussy is broken!

Molly: What.

Issa: You know I read about it. It's like Pussies is breaking everywhere I think your pussy is sad. I think it's had enough and if it could talk it would make that sad Marge Simpson groan.

Molly: mmmhmmmm [like Marge Simpson]

Issa: That's it! That's your pussy! (Rae & Wilmore, 2016)

As seen in this episode from season one, Rae does not overcorrect media portrayals of Black women as hypersexual by making them sexless or asexual as other shows do, instead she recognizes that sex may be important to Molly. However, Rae makes Molly's character complex by making her outwardly appear self-confident, while inwardly she is just as insecure as Issa. By making the choice to show Molly as multifaceted, Rae both acknowledges the existing stereotypes while providing an alternative depiction of a Black woman.

In reviewing the episodes, the women cannot help but discuss the differences between *Insecure* and other popular reality television shows arguing that Rae's depiction is something that is more relatable and realistic:

Jessie: That is not the vast majority of Black women. Black women you know, they are not all the same. I like that the show has different aspects of Black women where you know you have Issa's awkward. You know not all Black women are for a lack of better words, sex kittens you know and all about trying to be a basketball wife you know. Sometimes we are awkward and we're nerdy.

Maya: We're not all Gucci down and vacations and having brunch all the time

Jessie: Sometimes we brunch

Erica: now wait I do like to be a lady who brunches lol

Zora: They're multifaceted. They're not flat like when you do watch... I'm guilty. I watch and I love me some Love and Hip Hop

Jessie: We all love Ratchet tv!

In tongue and cheek, Rae humorously defines ratchet saying,

I can't give a dictionary definition, but I can say that it's like if 'ghetto' and 'hot shitty mess' had a baby. And that baby had no father and became a stripper, then made a sex tape with an athlete and then became a reality star. (Warner, 2015)

These reality television shows become guilty pleasures for many Black women because of what they *could* represent. In other words, "if I watch the show and I am able to relate to it in even a small way, am I 'ratchet' too?" Or better yet, many black women, including the ones in this focus group, understand that the stereotypical caricatures used, later become seemingly accurate, but inauthentic images of the "Other" causing them to become exhausted by so many conflicting image and anxious thinking that this is the way the world sees them. As Zora says,

In reality television, they're one note you know. If your baby daddy cheating on you, that is all you get to be this season. But with them in *Insecure*, you get to see the various sides, the different things they are dealing with.

## **“My Girlfriends, There Through Thick and Thin”: The Importance of Black Women Friendships**

Rae is able to capture Black women in friendship with each other as a way to combat images of Black women as enemies and unsupportive of each other. In a 2017 interview with Essence magazine, Rae comments, “for a long time, I was just not seeing great black female friendships on television. It was constantly about tearing one another down or throwing shade. There are elements of that in the television show but for the most part, black women are essential to my life” (Rae as cited in Scott, 2017). As Terrell (2019) exclaims, this show is an ode to Black women’s friendships taking them “beyond tired “sassy” sidekick narratives and [making] them centerpieces.” Friendship is just as important to the women in the den. According to the women, “regular” functioning Black friendships are missing in media and when they are presented, they are shown in secondary plot lines that are often overshadowed by arguments between women:

Jessie: I love black women friendship. I think it’s the best thing!

Angie: It is and because I love them, on the flipside I hate when they’re ruptured especially in public spaces which is why I don’t watch reality tv.

Jessie: you’re right about that because it puts a bad view on black women because it’s like we can’t have relationships, normal functional relationships with each other

Angie: when all the Black women I know have healthy friendships

Room: right!

Jessie: And I just be like, this is not how we operate!

Friendship is vital for their emotional health. As seen in the discussion on whiteness, the friendship circles provide the space for them to decompress without judgement and with candor. Sister Circles (Giddings, 1984) are spaces that serve as support groups built around friendship and kinship ties in both professional and non-professional settings (Hall et al., 2012; Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Sister circles are rooted in building and maintaining community while providing a safe space for Black women to vent their frustrations to those who understand them. This is reinforced within the focus group as Angie points out:

Black women who don't grow up or have friendships with Black or long term relationships with Black women feel left out of that, out of a certain kind of conversation or for lack of better term and authentic type of conversation or commonality so I know that it is based on community. It has to be and that it transcends space and time and whatever because we could be legit all over the world. Like we can be in Whole Foods, granted I shop at a bougie Whole Foods, but if something goes wrong, we're the first ones to *(makes a quick side eye)* make that kind of connection so I do think it has ties to the community.

Friendships among Black women seem to be a necessity for the group. As Angie says, this type of community, “transcends space and time” but more importantly they are cultivated over time. Because there may be similarities in upbringing and mannerisms, non-verbal cues are an indicator for how connected the Black woman is to the Black community. Angie's side eye to another Black women in Whole Foods reinforces cultural ties to upbringing and shared experiences echoing Zora's sentiments that “you can give a look” and have a whole conversation.

Rae is intentional about capturing Black women in multiple ways beginning in the writers rooms where historically there have been few Black women. *Insecure's* first

season offers a more inclusive writers room to include four gay men, seven Black women, a queer white woman, a straight white man and a straight Black man (Waxman, 2016). It is because of the diversity in the writers room, that Rae and her team are able to capture the nuances of Black friendship in ways that are more authentic than the superficial and often manufactured friendship on other sitcoms and reality television shows. She not only captures communication styles, but the mannerisms and complexities of Black women supporting other Black women. As Maya says, “It’s the comradery in the dialogue between Molly and Issa. I think we as black women have a different way of talking with each other. It’s just a real conversation.” Angie provides an example of what this looks like:

Angie: I’ll tell my girlfriends later when something has happened. It was hella awkward and I know the humor in this moment and I can even imagine myself telling them later. I even know what voice I’m going to use later and because they know me, they can tell when I’m about to tell them something

Erica: they lean in

Angie: right and say, “oh lord, girl what happened?”

Jessie: they know when you hit them with the “girl”

Zora: Giiirrrrrllll

Maya: let me tell you...

This scenario not only shows the sense of familiarity needed in any friendship, but it also captures the performative, choral conversations within Black women’s friendship when someone in the group takes the stage to share their story. Like any friendship, support does not always mean saying yes, but more importantly it means being able to say no or



correct your friend. The women discuss a scene in episode one, where Molly and Issa disagree over Issa making contact with her ex-boyfriend. Issa arranges a meeting with him at a nightclub under the guise that Molly needs cheering up after her most recent heartbreak. On the ride home from the club, Molly realizes Issa meeting her ex was not a coincidence, and she calls her out. Table 3 shows the conversation between Molly and Issa as well as the dialogue around this specific scene.

**Table 3**

***Insecure* Dialogue Alongside Den Dialogue: Real Friendship**

<i>Insecure</i>	Den Dialogue
Molly: The only reason we went to the hoodrat-ass club was so you could hook up with Daniel.	Maya: I think there is comradery in the dialogue between Molly and Issa. I think we as black women have a different way of talking with each other. It's just a real conversation. It's like she told her, "if you go sleep with him, you dumb!"
Issa: I didn't even know he was going to be there!	
Molly: Bitch stop it. You knew This was always about you	<i>Room laughs</i>
Issa: It was about you too	Maya: your best friend is just gon tell you, you dumb, you stupid. Just like she said, you got a broken pussy.
Molly: Is my life a joke to you? No, no, no. Real talk Cause it's bad enough I have to deal with real triflin' niggas and real untraditional niggas on a daily basis. Now I got to worry about dealing with a triflin' best friend? You made a joke of my heartbreak up there!	<i>Room laughs</i>
Issa: I didn't mean to. I didn't think about it like that.	Maya: you just have that real... the realness of the conversation. You'll call your best friend dumb and stupid, cuss her out in the car.
	Jessie: but let somebody else do it though...
	India: right. We not having that

<p>Molly: That's the damn problem Issa. You don't stop and think about how the shit you do can actually affect others.</p> <p>Issa: Are you kidding me? My whole life is about how shit affects others okay. My job, my boyfriend, you. I care about how shit affects you to. I always listen to you!</p> <p>Molly: Nigga you only listen to me because I make you feel better about you.</p> <p><i>Phone chimes as Issa gets a text message from Danie her ex. Issa reads and responds to the message as Molly is talking</i></p> <p>Molly: I didn't even want to go out tonight. You drag me here, then I meet a decent dude, I mean you should have seen how fast Jared left. What if he was the one! Oh that's right, I'll never know!</p> <p><i>Moment of silence</i></p> <p>Molly: Bitch, I know you did not just respond to that muthafukin text message?!</p> <p>Issa: I didn't</p> <p>Molly: You're lying. Did you just send a text message?</p> <p>Issa: I swear on my brother's life and my life, I did not send a text</p> <p><i>Text message sends</i></p> <p>Issa: Okay, now it's technically sent. But Daniel, he disappeared...</p>	<p>Maya: then there's a problem</p> <p>Zora: To kinda piggyback off of what you're saying, how Black women as friends communicate, they'll kind of show vulnerability, but then also a level of strength too. I don't know if that makes sense.</p> <p>Room: mmm hmmm</p> <p>Zora: It's like I can say to you that makes you look stupid like that makes me look stupid. I'm acknowledging that there is a part of myself that's vulnerable for me... so the strength part comes in... I'm going to use my vulnerability to help you be better.</p> <p>Jessie: To lift you up</p> <p>Zora: To help you be stronger.</p> <p>Room: hmmmmmm</p> <p>Zora: We'll be fine again and so sometimes it helps because you have that level of friendship. You may not have to have a full conversation but this is my peace offering based in a little bit of humor cause we know we might have an inside joke about it or whatever the case may be. I think you're right about how it helps soften some really tough things cause they are going through a lot and the last place she may want to have another tough conversation is with her best friend.</p>
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Molly: You know what fuck you. And if you fuck Daniel, you're as much of a dumb bitch as I am! (Rae & Wilmore, 2016)	
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From both conversations, correcting each other in friendship seems to be both loving and necessary. What the women call real, or authentic conversations reflect the importance of telling the truth or having truth telling conversations in Black women's friendships even when the conversation appears harsh in its delivery. Because Molly and Issa share a close relationship, Molly is able to explain her feelings to Issa with no filter; even if this means calling her out for being a bad friend. The conversation in the den was not about choosing sides in the argument or dissecting why Molly was talking to Issa in such a cruel way, but recognizing the need for having tough conversations in friendship. Zora comments, "I'm acknowledging that there is a part of myself that's vulnerable for me... I'm going to use my vulnerability to help you be better" demonstrating why tough conversations or "real talk" is loving and necessary for Black women's friendships to survive.

Because Rae writes in a way where the women feel like they are a part of Issa's friend group, Rae, as a creative, is not without critique in her depictions of Black friendships. The last episode, "Broken as F@^&", creates a conversation around Rae's use of certain characters to be the butt of the joke as well as a conversation on when the friendship group is not always a safe space. It is clear that although Rae wants to showcase Black women in friendship, Issa and Molly's friendship dynamic ranks higher than their friendship group with Kellie and Tiffany. The final episode takes place on Kellie's birthday trip to Malibu. Molly and Issa are not speaking to each other because

during one of these truth-telling conversations, they both disagree with the truths presented, namely that Molly may need more than the friendship to find emotional support and seek therapy, and Issa needs to be more accountable for her actions in all of her dealings. Because of the tension with Issa and Molly, the trip suffers. In a hot tub scene, the last scene of the season where we see the all of the friends together, there is a shift in humor and a shift in the friendship group dynamics.

**Table 4**

***Insecure* Dialogue Alongside Den Dialogue: Friendship Group Dynamics**

<i>Insecure</i>	Den dialogue
<p><i>A drunk Kellie tries to kiss Tiffany in a game of “we did say” (like truth or dare with no truths only dares)</i></p> <p>Kellie: Oh my God, why you looking at me like you Stacy Dash and I just told you, you Black?</p> <p><i>Group laughs</i></p> <p>Tiffany: none of that</p> <p>Kellie: Marriage has made you boring. Issa it’s your turn next. We did say. Issa: Uh no we didn’t. I’m good. Thanks.</p> <p>Molly: whatever. I’ll take her go. And can ya’ll make it challenging this time. Challenge a ho.</p> <p>Tiffany: I mean we can’t really top what you did with that guy last night</p> <p>Molly: <i>(tssss)</i> don’t be mad cause I got game</p>	<p>Jessie: There was humor there but it was used more so to direct the others of what they were doing wrong rather than bigging each other up and having a relatable experience with each other.</p> <p>Angie: and also even though if you’re a good person, you know who you can confide in but you wonder if it’s such and such birthday, or if Molly can really get her life together it just makes you question whose side you’re supposed to be on.</p> <p>Angie: Like there’s no humor when we escape from each other like when we see Kellie and Tiffany having that humor I don’t like that it is at a cost to Molly but either way it is an escape from a particular thing.</p> <p>Jessie: cause honestly with that their humor against Molly doesn’t reflect badly on Molly but it reflects on the fact that they are not necessarily happy or they’re unhappy with what they’re life Is doing.</p>

<p>Issa: No, give her something. New Molly's got it.</p> <p>Molly: yes, yes she does</p> <p><i>Tiffany and Kellie look at each other and roll their eyes. The group is silent</i></p> <p>Kellie: so we just all gon sit here and pretend new Molly ain't the same bitch</p> <p>Tiffany: <i>(laughing out)</i></p> <p>Kellie: that we've known forever <i>(laughing)</i></p> <p>Tiffany: I wasn't going to say anything, but like how is new Molly different?</p> <p>Molly: I embrace who I am. I do what I want and not give a fuck what anybody thinks. Ole boy from the club was cute, so I got with him.</p> <p>Kellie: But that's what you always do <i>(laughing)</i></p> <p>Tiffany: No No No. Now she embraces it!</p> <p>Kellie: Ohhhhhh</p> <p>Tiffany: So new Molly sabotages her life on purpose.</p> <p>Kellie: Oh okay, okay, okay <i>(laughing)</i> So new Molly chooses for niggas to walk up out of her life. Got it. Cool</p> <p><i>Kellie and Tiffany laugh as both Issa and Molly look uncomfortable. (Rae, 2016)</i></p>	<p>Angie: yeah they ain't shit friends. Like there's no humor when we escape from each other like when we see Kelly and Tiffany having that humor I don't like that it is at a cost to Molly but either way it is an escape from a particular thing.</p> <p>Jessie: cause honestly with that their humor against Molly doesn't reflect badly on Molly, but it reflects on the fact that they are not necessarily happy or they're unhappy with what they're life is doing.</p> <p>Angie: yeah they ain't shit friends!</p>
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In this scene, there are remnants of the cattiness the women discussed when talking about reality television. There is clearly a breakdown in the friendship group as the humor does not signal community among them, but separation. Because there is no reciprocity in vulnerability, as seen in Molly and Issa's argument, the friendship circle is no longer safe space. Molly becomes the joke not just in on the jokes. The tension in the den reflects the tension on the screen as the women listen to the group use humor against each other. As Jessie observes, the humor in this moment was not positive, "bigging each other up," but it was biting and critical showing how quickly friendships turn. Not only was the group turning the humor against Molly, the writers were turning the humor against Kellie who was not the focal point of her own birthday celebration making her celebration a cruel joke.

### **Speaking for Ourselves: Characteristics of Black Women's Speech and the Functions of Black Women's Humor**

Richardson (2002) says, "Our language, our mother tongues, is at least partly how we know what we know. Every language represents a particular way of making sense of the world" (p. 677). In this sense, humor is considered a nonstandard language that helps Black women make sense of the world; the nuances of humor are hard to capture in written form, but that does not mean that the complexities of humor are nonexistent. It is in those nuanced spaces that the women in the group were able to share their definitions and functions of Black women's humor. Although their discussion was consistent with the existing research in humor studies, particularly humor functioning as a coping mechanism, the women were able to share what they were coping with, as seen in the

previous sections, and offer further insight on how humor functions for them personally. The purpose of this section is to combine *what* the women discussed with *how* they discussed these subjects.

In Black humor traditions, to understand humor, one must first understand Black speech performances. Zora Neale Hurston recognized this as she wrote the *Characteristics of Negro expression* in 1936. Among the three expressions mentioned, the “will to adorn” is most relevant to this discussion. According to Hurston, the will to adorn is described as the speech patterns, dress, and an overall lifestyle that “satisfies the soul of its creator” (1936) and oftentimes its importance may not always be recognizable or appreciated by conventional standards. Black women’s humor functions in much of the same way. Hurston discusses the use of simile and metaphor, verbal nouns, and double descriptive as adornments to the English language. Geneva Smitherman’s *Talkin’ and Testifyin’: The Language of Black America* (1977) outlines several modes of discourse and smaller units of expression used by Black speakers that expand Hurston’s research. The following section highlights the two most prominent expressions used in the den dialogue, choral speech and narrative sequencing. It is important to note that while these expressions are discussed here in isolation, often times multiple expressions are used with multiple meanings. Humor is found in both *what* is said and *how* it is said and received by others. To capture this, I include conversations in their entirety. For the nonverbal elements of the conversation, I used stage directions in italics to signal when there was laughter as well as to add individual mannerisms that contributed to the performances of humor.

## Choral Speech

What Smitherman (1977) identifies as “call and response,” often seen in Black church traditions but reflected other aspects of Black life, I call, choral speech. Within this mode of expression, speech is a communal act that requires active listening and participation. Through choral speech, I add that the listeners or audience members are not only supposed to respond but add to the dialogue when applicable filling in gaps in the story or offering instant reactions to information through both verbal and nonverbal methods. In this way, the women within the den became co-producers of stories and not just passive listeners. In the following example, Angie tells a story about an awkward encounter seeing her friends’ husband out with another woman at brunch:

Angie: I had this awkward moment where I saw my friend’s husband in a situation... where I saw him with someone

Erica: mmm that’s uncomfortable

Angie: Isn’t it?! It was even more uncomfortable because I was trying to avoid his gaze and he said, “hey is that you?” And I’m like, “it is not...” (*Laughing*)

*Room laughs*

Angie: he don’t pay no bills or nothing at the house and he out here...

Jessie: (*loud and sweetly with a slight southern drawl*) AINT THAT FUNNY!

*Rooms laughs loudly*

Jessie: You don’t contribute nothing

Angie: but you out her stuntin’ for this chick in your wife’s car

Jessie: When was the last time you took me out on a date?



Angie: But the fact is she's my friend and I know he hasn't taken her out or paid the utility bill

Erica: yeesh

Jessie: Chhiiiiillleeeee

Angie: Like he's done nothing. He is using your gas. HE'S BURINING IT UP...

Jessie: CHIIILLLEEEEE

Angie: At the expensive hotel brunch with another woman (*The ladies react to the specific hotel mentioned*)

Jessie and Zora: WHATTT!!

Erica: I ain't been to that brunch!

Jessie: THAT'S 60 DOLLARS *Room laughs*

Zora: YOU GOT 60 DOLLARS PLUS TIP?

Angie: HE'S GOT MORE THAN 60 DOLLARS PLUS TIP CAUE I GUARAN-DAMN-TEE YOU THAT'S HER MONEY!

*Room laughs*

Zora: Mmmmm. He was probably like I took my momma

Erica: Right. He took his mama...

Jessie: Let me tell you something. If I ever found out my husband took... you ain't got no job?

Angie: even if my husband took my home girl...

Jessie: TO THE HOTEL FOR BRUNCH!

Angie: (*nodding*) we gon have a whole problem. You just want her to know you know brunch because men don't offer brunch necessarily. That's something sistas do. Men don't be like, yeah let's go to brunch. So you're trying to impress her anyway and, you're driving your girl's car cause I saw it outside!

Jessie: MMMMMMMMMMM

Zora: Wow

Erica: “Now tell me who she was”<sup>14</sup>

*Room laughs*

The group becomes a chorus with distinct parts as Angie tells her story. Angie begins as the choir director setting the tempo for the conversation. By opening with the title, “I had this awkward moment,” the choir is primed for the performance. They automatically know that they are about to hear something absurd and that is reflected in their responses. There are times when the women speak in unison as seen when Zora and Jessie both react to the man seen with another women at the expensive hotel brunch. There are other times when the women break into smaller choral parts serving as adornments to the story as seen in the repeated phrase “chile” (child) and the inaudible “Mmmmmm” to signal ridiculousness, corroborating Angie’s disbelief at this encounter. As the women adorn the story, their reactions feed Angie’s performance and the story crescendos as seen here:

Angie: At the expensive hotel brunch with another woman  
(*The ladies react to the specific hotel mentioned*)

Jessie and Zora: **WHATTT!!**

Erica: I still aint been to that brunch!

Jessie: (*yelling in disbelief*) **THAT’S 60 DOLLARS**

*Room laughs*

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<sup>14</sup> This is a reference to the Black cult classic film *Friday* directed by F. Gary Gary. Craig, played by Ice Cube, is having a disagreement with his girlfriend, Joi, played by Paula Jai Parker. Irritated with Craig at the thought of him talking to another women, Joi swings her waist length braids demanding Craig explain himself.

**Zora: YOU GOT 60 DOLLARS PLUS TIP?**

**Angie: HE'S GOT MORE THAN 60 DOLLARS PLUS TIP CAUSE I  
GUARAN-DAMN-TEE YOU THAT'S HER MONEY!**

Their passionate responses boil over and Angie takes back her role as director and story leader through vocal modulation. In the Black church tradition, vocal modulation is a key element in a sermon. Angie's vocal modulation signals the climax to the story and peak ridiculousness as she exclaims, "He's got more than 60 dollars plus tip cause I guaran-damn-tee you that's her money!" Morgan (2003) describes loud talking as a type for signifyin' that signals what is meant, is not always directly stated as seen when Jessie loudly exclaims, "CHIIILLLEEE" (child). In one phrase Jessie indirectly signals to the group that the whole situation is wrong, and the husband is out of line. In Angie's case, however, loud talking signals her ability to tell the truth. Her loud talking is a direct critique of the husband's actions and functions to further drive home the point that he is "good for nothing" and taking advantage of her friend. Together the group laughs not only because of her exaggerated language and uncommon word usage, but because her sentiment further proves how outlandish the incident becomes.

### **Narrative Sequencing**

Narrative sequencing or storytelling is where the speaker conveys his or her perspective on the facts through explaining a point and persuading the audience to find truth in the story (Smitherman, 1977). Because Black culture is rooted in oral traditions, storytelling, and the ability to follow the story, seems to come naturally as seen in the previous scene from the Den and the women's ability to navigate the additional,

spontaneous responses. To those unfamiliar with oral traditions, the stories seem incoherent because of the tangential properties. The women used narrative sequencing to tell their perspectives and in doing so, they took on the roles of various characters, including alternate versions of themselves, to recreate scenarios with alternative endings that revealed their true feelings. In the following scene, Maya tells the group about comedy show:

Maya: My boyfriend's brother is having a comedy show with two other friends and it's at the recreation center up here in town.

Zora: Oh okay

Maya: And I'm just like when did he become a comedian? (*face is annoyed and confused*)

*Room laughs*

Maya: When did this...when did this happen? (*with a slight grin*)

Zora: Girrrl...

Maya: When did this become a dream?... okay whatever (*throws hands up in the air like a little kid*)

Erica: I guess he found his dreams

Maya: And it's tonight and I'm just like alright

Zora: mmm hmmm

Maya: I mean his brother alone has 40–50 people coming to see him

Erica: Goodness! Well is he funny?

Maya: I mean in regular conversation (*shrugs shoulders shaking her head yes*). Like spend money funny? I don't know...

*Room laughs*

Jessie: Yeah spending money funny is different

Erica and Zora together: yeah it is (*laughing and looking at each other*)

Maya: yeah that is...I don't know. Imma be supportive (*voice gets higher in pitch*)

Zora: (*in a matching high pitch voice*) That's what girlfriends do...

*Room laughs*

Erica: That's funny

Zora: I be pickin' and choosin'.

Erica: when you want to be supportive?

Zora: yes (*matter of factly*)

*Room laughs*

Erica: Alright. I'm done

Zora: When I'm your wife, then I won't pick and choose (*breaks into laughter*)

Erica: well...

*Room laughs*

Maya: I just won't be supportive (*straight faced*) like "bae you coming?"

Erica: STOP (*laughing*)

*Room laughs*

Maya: Not at all. I no longer have to come (*laughing*)

Zora: I know right!

Erica: You mine already so no I don't have to be supportive

Zora: See I be on a support like range. Like where does this fall for me?

Maya: Am I trying to impress the family? (*makes a thinking face, with one hand to her lips*) alright I'll show up

Zora: Right!

Maya: Do I need to impress the family? No? Oh okay then.

Zora: I ain't going! *(laughing)* You got to see where it fall on the spectrum *(moving her hands apart to show range)*.

Erica: words of wisdom for us all

Zora: It's a science

Maya: The whole family is going so obviously, I have to go

Zora: Yeah you have to go

Maya: *(sigh)* well alright. I guess I'll be there

Zora: You got it girl!

Erica: You do!

Zora: You gon' laugh and everything! *(snapping her fingers)*

Maya: Or I'm just going to be...*(motions like she's scrolling through her phone)*. I'm going to be sitting there like, "mmm hmmm he gone be hilarious" *(still scrolling through phone)*

*Room laughs*

Maya: I'll be sitting there on Instagram like, "oooh that was funny!" and fake laugh *(fakes laughs with eye roll as she looks off into the distance)*

Maya's story is important because it highlights distinct features of Black women's humor or what Smitherman (1977) calls smaller units of expression. Choral speech, as mentioned before, is seen throughout the conversation as they respond to Maya's lack of enthusiasm about going to the comedy show. Towards the end of the conversation, the chorus encourages her to attend the performance and to have a good time saying, "You got it girl!" and "You gon' laugh and everything." More importantly this highlights the

performative nature of storytelling namely asking questions and acting out parts or being in character.

As Maya tells her story, she takes on the role of both actress and narrator. Through the use of signifyin' questions, she performs her inner dialogue revealing her true feelings about supporting her boyfriend's brother. Smitherman (1977) describes signifying as verbal insults or humorously talking about someone. Because the insult is in jest, it is to be taken lightly. Maya opens with the signifyin' questions, "When did he become a comedian? and when did this become a dream?" to show the group why she does not want to attend the show. She uses questions to interrogate his reasons for being a comedian by picking fun at that the seemingly random and unplanned decision to want to be a performer. She further makes fun of him by questioning his ability to be publicly recognized as funny. When I asked if he was funny, she responds, "I mean in regular conversation. Like spend money funny? I don't know." The group laughs at the brutal honesty in the answer and her hesitation when talking about his talent.

In the same scene, both Maya and Zora play alternate versions of themselves as they act out what it really means to be a supportive girlfriend and "pickin' and choosin'" when to be supportive:

Zora: I be pickin' and choosin'.

Erica: when you want to be supportive?

Zora: yes (*matter of factly*)

***Room laughs***

Erica: Alright. I'm done

Zora: When I'm your wife, then I won't pick and choose (*breaks into laughter*)

Erica: well...

*Room laughs*

Maya: I just won't be supportive (*straight faced*) like "bae you coming?"

Erica: STOP (*laughing*)

*Room laughs*

Maya: Not at all. I no longer have to come (*laughing*)

Zora: I know right!

Erica: You mine already so no I don't have to be supportive

Zora: See I be on a support like range. Like where does this fall for me?

Maya: Am I trying to impress the family? (*makes a thinking face, with one hand to her lips*) alright I'll show up

Zora: Right!

Maya: Do I need to impress the family? No? Oh okay then.

Zora: I ain't going! (*laughing*) You got to see where it falls on the spectrum (*moving her hands apart to show range*).

Both women use intonational contouring (Smitherman, 1977) as they shift the pitch of the voice for humorous effect. They raised their voices to signal when they would intentionally act supportive signaling to the group there is an obligation to being supportive stating, "That's what girlfriends do." Maya goes a step further and distinguishes two types of support, showing up and being present:



Maya: Or I'm just going to be... *(motions like she's scrolling through her phone)*. I'm going to be sitting there like, "mmm hmmm he gone be hilarious" *(still scrolling through phone)*

***Room laughs***

Maya: I'll be sitting there on Instagram like, "oooh that was funny!" and fake laugh *(fakes laughs with eye roll as she looks off into the distance)*

She knows that she is showing support by physically showing up. But more humorously, she recognizes and highlights for the group that she has made the intentional decision not to be present as she acts out her behavior during the comedy show by scrolling through Instagram and pretending to laugh. As seen here, being in character is important because it allows the women to say the things they wish they could say but cannot because it is inappropriate to do so. Goffman (1981) defines this as self-talk where the conversation:

strikes directly at our sense of the orientation of the speaker to the situation as a whole. Self-talk is taken to involve the talker in a situationally inappropriate way...it warns others that they might be wrong in assuming a jointly maintained base ready mutual intelligibility among all persons present. (p. 85)

Both Maya and Zora are aware that being unsupportive is "situationally inappropriate" as Maya says, "the whole family is going so obviously, I have to go." However, in the den she knows it is safe enough to speak out against the social norm of being supportive and express the frustrations in living up to this norm even when it is inconvenient for her.

Being in character, and in particular using role play as a method of critique, is also shown as the women discuss race relations. Allen (2005) asserts, "African American women's performance... builds possibilities as it resists colonial intrusion and homogenization... functioning to solidify the lines between like-minded participants" (p.

98). Zora tells us about her interaction with a white, male co-worker who wants to touch her hair:

Zora: So I had crochet braids...

Room: Mmmm (*laughing*)

Zora: And I think he wanted to touch my hair, but I would not give him the satisfaction. So he would like, "I really like your hair" and I said, "Thank you." And he was like, "is it heavy?" and I said, "Nope. Light as a feather!"(*smirk appears on her face as she recounts the story*)

*Room laughs*

Zora: He was like, "it looks heavy." I said, "it's not. "He's like, "You sure?"

*Room laughs*

Jessie: What does it matter!! (*laughing*)

Zora: I was like "positive," and then he goes, "hmmm" and then he walks away (*laughing*)

Erica: You didn't play right!

Zora: No! I know you want to touch it and you're not, cause they try... I feel like he tries to treat us, as in Black people, like specimens. I say he treats us like social experiments. He asks questions and he believes, cause he says he's "woke", that he's asking questions ...

Maya: Did he say that?

Erica: Oh lord

Zora: yeah he's asking questions to better understand or to be more like culturally aware or something but really the questions you ask become like poking and prodding kind of questions where we're like a social experiment and you're trying to... I'm not going to give you that satisfaction. Once I figured that out, I was like no.

Zora relays the experience around hair that many Black women share. Her story offers a critique of her coworker as a way to explore her version of “colonial intrusion” (Allen, 2005, p. 89). At the beginning of the story, the group laughs as she mentions crochet braids because they think they are already familiar with how this story will go and the room collectively rolls their eyes. For Black women, natural hair, and braids in particular, seem to be a magnet for white coworkers’ hands. There is a fascination with these hairstyles and conversations ultimately end in the question, “Can I touch your hair?” In recent years, and as natural hairstyles and protective hairstyles such as braids have become more common in the workplace, white coworkers are not so adamant about outwardly expressing their desire to touch natural hair. As Zora tells her story, she answers all the coworker’s questions, but she does not give him permission to touch her hair as his questions allude. By saying, “You didn’t play right,” the group quickly recognizes the ways Zora makes deliberate performance choices by ignoring and avoiding her coworker’s objective to touch her hair. In the end we laugh not just because of the familiarity in the experience, but because of the way she destabilizes her coworker’s efforts to touch her hair, something that we are always trying to do but are rarely successful in doing. We see her critique the situation more explicitly as she explains her choice saying, “I feel like he tries to treat us, as in Black people, like specimens. I say he treats us like social experiments.” As Zora ends her story and changes character from storyteller to actress, she provides an alternative ending to the scene where she is able to talk directly to her coworker without consequence, saying, “I know you want to touch it and you’re not... I’m not going to give you that satisfaction.”

She breaks her role as storyteller to speak her mind because she understands the social consequences of speaking her mind in public space. She could be seen as combative and without feeling by her coworkers which could create a more hostile workplace and fuel the already existing stereotypes of angry Black women.

More importantly, in both scenes there is an underlying tension between public performances and private thoughts/ performances. Public performances are connected to speaking and acting in ways that are socially appropriate while in public spaces. Maya knows that in public she needs to be supportive of her boyfriend's family, and Zora knows that she needs to not cuss out coworkers for asking "prodding" and inappropriate questions but find another way to respond. In public spaces these women understand the social consequences of their speech namely the threat of being labeled combative, unapproachable, or the threat of not being taken seriously. In a side conversation the women discuss the importance of speech and the ways their speech patterns impact how they are treated.

Zora: [An extended family member] told me the story about how one day at the hospital where she works apparently this Black woman had come into the hospital and she was acting, to use her language, "extra" and other kinds of stuff

Angie: (*shaking her head*) I'm sorry, a Black woman came into the hospital and she was being extra. Sooo she was being Black. Okay go ahead.

Jessie: and the Black aunt is telling the story

Zora: uh huh. But come to find out the woman was having a heart attack. The people did not treat her well based on the way she was acting.

**Room:** mmmmmm

Angie: cause she was acting quote unquote

Zora and Angie: **EXTRA**

“Extra” could mean many things and in the Black community, it often does. In this case, extra means the woman may have been loud, impatient, demanding, or even “hysterical.” The woman knew something was wrong and she knew she needed to be seen immediately. Though these performance choices would have signaled immediate action or at least an acknowledgment of pain when performed by others, for this Black woman, her performance demonized her and made her invisible by the very ones she needed most. Sadly, the woman in the story was mistreated because her public performance did not provoke sympathy from her audience. The story continues:

Zora: So the aunt asked me if I felt like had that woman come in acting a different way would they have treated her differently? I said absolutely!

Erica: Of course

Zora: If she would have come in there speaking to them in a way that they deemed appropriate

Angie: She could have died

**Room: *collective sigh***

Zora: I know. We got on something else and she said, I’m the same person all the time. I don’t change. I was like well we all switch a little bit. Because the fact of the matter is, I know that if I want a particular kind of service or a particular kind of action, or something of that nature, I’m going to change my octave a little bit (*making voice softer*), I’m going to...

Erica: Increase my register (*singing and speaking higher*)

Angie: and my subjects and verbs are going to agree. Let’s be honest

Zora: Right! I said it happens. I was like so let's not pretend that we haven't had to kind of take that and use that as some kind of mechanism for us to be able to operate in this world in a particular way and move in a particular way

JC: come on! (*snapping fingers in agreement*)

The women acknowledge the unspoken rules to a respectable public performance listing, quieting the voice, speaking at a higher pitch, and making sure subjects and verbs agree. These no doubt were the same rules Molly from *Insecure* learned through trial and error and later tried to remind Rasheeda of as they worked together. Stories like this further demonstrate why Black women are often forced to become performers in their daily lives.

### **Functions of Black Women's Humor**

Within the den dialogue, we worked together to unpack how this group of Black women began to define humor. In their journals, I asked the women to write their thoughts on Black women's humor. How did it function? What did it look like to them? As they shared what they wrote, I wrote down the words and phrases that prompted the most recognition. Within the group, the definition of Black humor was inherent in its many overlapping functions. This section briefly addresses the two most prominent ways the group used humor to soften the blow/ cope with others and to create bonds with other Black women.

#### **Softening the Blow and Coping with Others**

Softening the blow and coping with others both function as a form of relief humor where humor is used to ease tension; however, the key difference between the two forms is who benefits from the relief. While softening the blow, the women use humor to relieve tension for others, whereas in coping with others, the women use humor to ease

tensions for self as a form of self-care. In the following example we see how the two functions overlap:

Jessie: I think of it as self-care. You're dealing with so much mentally because you're having to do well in the workplace and, you really have to mentally say, I'm going to turn this off on the inside so I can do well in the workplace and be super pumped about it all day long

Zora: We continuously have to play their game and then I think, I don't know if you all know this but I think for me, I can speak for me since we are talking about humor too sometimes it ends in this laughter, this chuckle

Jessie: yup

Maya: nodding in agreement

Zora: but it's not that I find this funny.

Erica: Not at all

Zora: it's like this is my coping mechanism

Maya: right

Zora: Because I'm going to laugh or I'm going to pop off one of the two.

Erica: there's a thin line between laughter and anger.

Zora: Yeah!

Jessie: It's like we're always smiling and in my head I'm thinking, "I want to kill you!"

*Room laughs*

Zora: Exactly!

Maya: These bills coming...

*Room laughs*

Maya: and I'm just trying to pay em' so I got to keep smiling to pay them every month. And I think in real life humor helps us from breaking down keeps you from like literally like being in a car and just like driving to work crying because if I pull up to this place and one more fool say something to me...

*Room laughs*

Maya: It's gon be today! I will be down at HR

Jessie: shooting up the place

*Room laughs*

Erica: Now we have to pull the bail money for you. Note to self, keep a little change for Maya cause we don't know...

Here the women discuss the ways humor helps them cope in the workplace and the ways they deal with its politics by “playing the game.” As seen in “encounters with whiteness,” for these women, the game involves navigating white spaces, balancing work and life, combatting feeling of being unappreciated, and even being taken advantage of for having a strong work ethic. Zora is aware that her laughter does not always indicate something is funny, but that she laughs to cope. Jessie and Maya speak directly to “the game” saying, “It’s like we’re always smiling and in my head I’m thinking, “I want to kill you!” Again the women are conscientious of their public performances by using humor to mask their true feelings. Maya speaks of coping with life struggles like paying bills in addition to the trials of keeping and surviving a job saying, “If I pull up to this place and one more fool say something to me.” The humor turns darker suggesting the emotional burdens of the workplace and further demonstrating the thin line between anger and laughter. As Lavine (1977) states humor allowed Black people to “laugh at and thereby gain some perspective upon their own anger” (p. 324). Although the group laughs at the thought of going down



to HR to file a complaint or hear about a complaint filed against them, and the thought of “shooting up the place,” the reality is that we have seen countless news stories ending in these ways. There is a moment of silence after the laughter as the women drift into themselves and the room feels heavy with their realities of the work experiences. To soften the blow in facing these hard truths, I jokingly say, “Now we have to pull the bail money for you. Note to self, keep a little change for Maya cause we don't know...” The humor, rooted in irony, is in the harsh reality that any one of us could be pushed to the brink of anger and we need to be prepared just in case.

### **Creating Bonds**

As much of the humor research suggests, humor is subjective however, most can agree that in-group humor is communal and helps to strengthen bonds within the group. Because Black humor is coded as seen in the various performances of speech, familiarity of culture and custom is needed. Florini (2014) argues humor is the recognition and outpouring of cultural competence that rely on social and cultural resources. As seen in the women's discussion on friendship, for many Black women, it does not take much to recognize Black women's humor or share a moment with a complete stranger. Angie describes this moment:

So there's a picture that one of my students took of me and my colleagues giving a talk on *I Am Not Your Negro* and the first question the speaker asks of us, we all looked at each other and my student, who is a photographer captures this moment where we are all laughing and you can think something else is happening, but really we are all laughing at the questions about our blackness in this white space. It's like we know something without ever having seen each other...there is so much nuance there that we've all had these encounters.

They were connected by shared experiences, in their case, being one of a few Black faces on their campus. Other Black audiences would have laughed in the moment because they too know what it means to be a Black face on a predominantly white campus. When asked where this unspoken bond came from this was the reply:

Zora: it's just there. Like I could walk in and not even know Jessie but somebody could walk by and say something foolish or do something foolish and we'll look at each other like *(gives a side eye)*

*Room laughs*

Zora: like I don't know you. I might not even know your name and we all know what that look means or you know if somebody or your friend says something like.. I don't know and your response is "girrrrrl..."

*Room laughs*

Zora: it's just like even that one word girl you can say it five different ways with a different inflection, draw out one letter *(laughing)* and we just know like what you're expressing even in that one word and the way you're saying it.

Jessie: I think that doesn't just go with people of the same age group. *(rooms agrees with nodding heads)* That goes for Black women in general. So it could be a young black woman that's in her 20's and one in their 50's and they keep crossing paths and something happens and they both can just look at each other.

Room: mmmmmhmmm

Zora: Like don't be in the store and someone's child acts out!

Room: yeasss!

Zora: Y'all look at each other like, it couldn't be me out there! Wouldn't be mine! Get yo child!

The bond is something observed over time and shared in the community as brought out by the ways Black women communicate through generations. Zora mentions the phrase,

“girrrll” (girl) which, depending on voice inflection, means a variety of things. Knowing when, where and how to use it is a part of the cultural competency of the group (Florini, 2014). Knowing its distinctions is a marker of your communal ties.

Because of its in-group and communal nature, those in the group are also able to recognize forced and manufactured bonds by those outside the group. Angie tells a story about her sister’s encounter in the doctor’s office:

Angie: White women try to talk to Black women. So like... short anecdote. My sister had got sick and went to the doctor. The chick was like hey how are you? My sister said, “I’m well I hope you are?” and the chick was like, “I mean, you ain’t got to impress me. I’m just a regular homegirl, you know what I’m saying. I’m just a regular homegirl.” My sister was like, “I’m sorry, impress you?” “Yeah you ain’t got to impress me. Cause you know Dr. X is my homeboy.. and she was like.. “yesss, yasssss.” And my sister was like...

Maya: No

*Room laughs*

Angie: You’re using that incorrectly.

Erica: She was using “yaaass” incorrectly?

Angie: Yes. My sister was just like, “that’s conversation among black women, that’s what we use to celebrate each other you know. Encourage each other, let each other know how we feel and stuff.” And she was like, “so just so you know, you’re using it incorrectly.” So the white girl is like, “you for real, like for real?” and my sister is like “yes” and walks away.

*Room laughs*

The humor here is two-fold. The women laugh because they have experienced this situation many times. In efforts to show a sense of comradery, or to be comfortable in conversations with Black people, many take on the performance of the other using

colloquialisms and exaggerated mannerisms learned from television. I cannot count the number of times, I have heard, “you go girl” or anything “girl” in a meeting, or a “you tell em!” when saying something as simple as, I need to remind my students of my office hours. The women also laugh because unlike many in the group who would have dismissed the young lady, Angie’s sister attempts to educate her on the nuances of Black women’s speech saying, “That’s conversation among black women, that’s what we use to celebrate each other you know. Encourage each other, let each other know how we feel and stuff.” And she was like, “So just so you know, you’re using it incorrectly.” The young lady lacked the social and cultural background knowledge needed to use “yasss” and therefore failed to bond with Angie’s sister because her communication was inauthentic.

As demonstrated in this chapter, the women within *Insecure* and the den used humor to discuss a variety of subjects including the workplace and friendship. As hooks (1993) asserts, “We express a lot of our negative thinking in humorous vernacular speech. It often has a quality of magic and sassiness that comforts. It’s tied up with our sense of being able to look on the rough side and laugh” (p. 62). The data suggests that a critical part of maintaining self was recognizing humor as a performance strategy. Though some of the women in the group (Angie and Zora) were consciously aware and direct in the ways they use and understand humor, others (Maya and Jessie) unconsciously and indirectly used humor. Despite these differences, they shared key distinctions in speech patterns, narrative sequences and choral speech as well as two

important functions of Black women's humor, softening the blow and coping with others and creating bonds between Black women.

## CHAPTER V

### “MAH OWN MIND HAD TO BE SQUEEZED AND CROWDED OUT TUH MAKE FOR YOURS IN ME”: MOVING TOWARD A BLACK WOMEN’S PEDAGOGY OF HUMOR

The quotation above is taken from Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In this scene, Janie is talking to her second husband, Jody, as he is on his deathbed. In these last moments together, Janie speaks her mind for the first time in years. Jody protests hearing her, but she is persistent saying, “Mah own mind had to be squeezed and crowded out tuh make for yours in me” (p. 83) She recognized the ways she lost herself in her husband. Many Black people hold these sentiments today as they try to live in a world that is constantly invalidating their experiences. As an English educator, I see this most often in composition courses and arguments surrounding standard English. Because language is first acquired in the home, when students attend school, the process of squeezing and crowding out the mind begins. Home and mother tongues are pushed aside, crowded out and replaced by standard language choices and clearer distinctions between what is considered academic and non-academic begin to surface. These distinctions ultimately damage student confidence and causes them to doubt their own minds. Outside of education, where I take up these ideas, Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) connects this squeezing out specifically to the experiences of Black women

likening “crowding” to a crooked room where Black women bend as they try to reconcile *perceptions* of Black womanhood from their *lived realities* of Black womanhood.

For persons of color there has been an ongoing need to comprehend their social position and how this impacts their realities. Freire’s (2000) continuous work in Brazil focuses on both teaching and learning from the oppressors with a goal towards liberation. Grande (2004) outlines red pedagogy; a pedagogy rooted in the experiences of indigenous or Native American people with the ultimate goal of decolonization. Brock (2019) outlines a pedagogy of wholeness; a pedagogy that connects one’s Black consciousness through sociopolitical transformation and connection to the personal. As a way to theorize the pain, she offers a framework that cares for the body and the spirit. Using culturally specific pedagogies, Freire, Grande, and Brock write for the care and keeping of specific audiences and yet many of their messages apply to a variety of audiences. Keeping these examples in mind, I propose a Black Women’s Pedagogy of Humor (BWPH) as a framework rooted in racial awareness that offers an alternate perspective for understanding Black women’s lived experiences while serving as a meaningful guide for the ways humor can help Black women see and understand the world. This chapter specifically answers the research questions, what is a Black women’s pedagogy of humor (BWPH) And How Are Black Women Public Pedagogues?

### **A Black Women’s Pedagogy of Humor (BWPH)**

won’t you celebrate with me  
what i have shaped into  
a kind of life? i had no model.  
born in babylon both nonwhite and woman  
what did i see to be except myself?

i made it up  
here on this bridge between  
starshine and clay,  
my one hand holding tight  
my other hand; come celebrate with me that everyday  
something has tried to kill me  
and has failed.  
(Lucille Clifton, 1993)

As this research shows, Black women's humor is quick, critical, and coded. A Black women's pedagogy of humor (BWPH) is a framework rooted in racial awareness that offers an alternate perspective for understanding Black women's lived experiences and serves as a meaningful guide for the ways Black women see and understand the world. BWPH takes the messiness Black women experience with the "isms" (racism, classism, ageism and the like) and recognizes humor as an innovative way to make sense of it all. This is a pedagogy that positions humor as a method of survival while sustaining and celebrating cultural connection. Within this pedagogy, humor is both an object of study and a set of strategies for Black women to use to navigate the world. A BWPH is a return back to intuitive ways of knowing and to traditional Black knowledge creation methods rooted in oral traditions.

### **Black Women's Humor As Public Pedagogy**

Understanding humor from a Black woman's perspective provides an alternative way of viewing the world. In order to do this, humor should not solely be examined in isolation (in the classroom, in the workforce, on the comedic stage), but examined in everyday life. Public pedagogy, though in existence for centuries, has become more theorized in recent years. Coined by Carman Luke (1996) as the pedagogy of the



everyday, public pedagogy is still hard to define and understand. In more contemporary works, public pedagogy, as understood within education, is heavily influenced by Henry Giroux's work. In his 2000 work, "Public pedagogy as Cultural Politics", Giroux asserts:

Central to [public pedagogy projects] is the need to begin at those intersections where people actually live their lives and where meaning is produced, assumed, and contested in the unequal relations of power that construct the mundane acts of everyday relations. Public pedagogy in this context becomes part of a critical practice designated to understand the social context of everyday life as lived relations of power. (p. 355)

Education then, and in turn pedagogical practices, extends beyond traditional classrooms and other institutions of learning and into people's everyday lived experiences. This includes, but is not limited to, learning from popular culture such as television, films, music, and public spaces such as museums and memorials (Ellsworth, 2005). Public pedagogy acknowledges artists, performers, creatives, and other cultural workers as public pedagogues or public intellectuals.<sup>15</sup> Within this study Issa Rae, as creative and cultural worker, is considered a public pedagogue and *Insecure* becomes a "contested educational space" (Rossing, 2016) that reshapes and reimagines dominant existing narratives of Black women and Black culture.

As outlined by Burdick and Sandlin (2013), public pedagogy is met with some critique including vague naming, uncritical execution, and a focus on *locating* sites of learning and education without a clear discussion of how these sites *function* as public pedagogy. In an attempt to acknowledge these limitations, Burdick and Sandlin (2013)

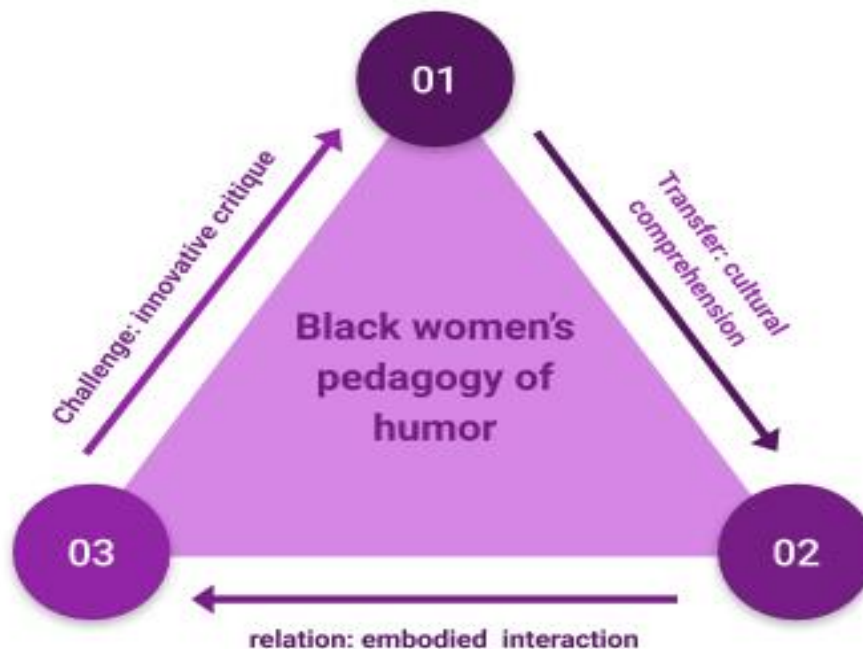
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<sup>15</sup> I use both terms interchangeably.

organize literature on public pedagogy into three strands outlining the various ways scholars have come to recognize and use this framework. In gaining an understanding of various public pedagogies, I recognize Black women's humor as a public pedagogy that is the culmination of all three strands.

**Figure 3**

**BWPH: A Culmination of Three Strands of Public Pedagogy**



Black women are already using humor to make critical connections between popular culture and everyday life through various media platforms sharing humorous and often ironic stories. Issa Rae as a public intellectual, humorously folds the various strands of public pedagogy into *Insecure*. By inducing laughter, Rae is able to use a combination of pleasure and critique (Mayo, 2008) to connect to a racially mixed audience while

writing content for Black people. As a popular cultural artifact, *Insecure* uses Black women's humor as a pedagogical tool. Though there is some overlap, the following sections will discuss each strand of public pedagogy and how they relate to Black women's humor.

### ***Transfer***

In the first strand, *transfer*, pedagogy is understood as it relates to human entities, “one that can be acted upon educationally via the introduction of content... either culturally, prescriptive or liberatory in nature” (Burdick and Sandlin, 2013, p. 147). With this understanding, public pedagogy is the intentional but often an indirect transfer of knowledge opening the space for one to critique social reproduction, “extending the meaning of pedagogy into other cultural apparatuses such as the media” (Giroux, 2003, p. 9). Some under this approach see social reproduction through popular culture as damaging to society reproducing hegemonic structures (Giroux, 2000, 2003, 2004), while others look to popular culture as an asset to understanding culture and self (Ellsworth, 2005).

To understand Black humor, a level of cultural comprehension (transfer) is needed to understand the nuance. Because Black women's humor is shrouded in innuendo and coded to fit the needs of the person, one must be comprehend cultural cues and idioms. Though not all Black audiences are the same, cultural comprehension allows Black creatives to reproduce the essence or likeness of Blackness through portrayals that are subjective and not clearly defined. Elam (2005) uses the Kings of Comedy—Steve Harvey, D.L Hughley, Bernie Mac, and Cedric the Entertainer—to demonstrate how

comedians reproduce this likeness in their talk on racial differences. Steve Harvey says, “Oh you know us,” D.L. Hughley, says, “We do shit different” or “We are different,” and Cedric the Entertainer says, “White people live by a different creed and Black people by a whole different creed” (Elam, 2005, p. 5). Each man comments on racial difference using one liners. By not explaining the differences, it leaves the audience to make their own inferences based on their own experiences. Filling in the gaps is a marker of Black humor that crosses gender. These gaps of knowledge coupled with the ability to fill them in, provide lessons about the Black community for those outside the community, while within the community, it marks one’s familiarity with it.

Within *Insecure*, humor provides these same lessons. The participant’s ability to fill in Rae’s gaps, reaffirm and celebrate their Blackness. Rae is intentional in creating embodied experiences of Blackness, without having to explain Blackness to outside audiences. Rae does this through her countless references to current Black popular culture. In episode two, “Messy as F\*\*k,” Issa and her boyfriend Lawrence are fighting because he did not acknowledge her birthday. She finds him in Rite Aid trying to buy her a birthday card. As he is perusing the card options, he picks up cards that are reminiscent of 2000’s rapper Drake, “You used to call me on your birthday” or ‘If you’re reading this then happy birthday’<sup>16</sup> and DJ Khaled’s famous catch phrase “Another one.” The women laugh at the play on words as well as Rae’s ability to make fun of the rapper Drake, who is often known for his sentimental lyrics. The humor here goes unexplained because Rae assumes the audience will understand the reference.

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<sup>16</sup> This is a play on Drake’s 2015 mixtape titled “If you’re reading this you’re too late.”

By contrast, Kenya Barris' ABC's show *Black-ish* (2015), centers Blackness through an all-Black leading cast, but some argue it is not a show for Black people entirely. The title of the show is in a dictionary type font and the opening credits suggest that the show is going to discuss definitions of Black things and Blackness. In the episode "The Dozens," Dre, played by Anthony Anderson, explains the dozens to his white coworkers, and the larger American audience, as he tries to find ways to help his son Junior stop a bully. The show cuts away to an animation outlining the history of the dozens from Africa to more modern day examples in former President Barak Obama. We later see Junior play the dozens against his mother saying, "You don't just have bags under your eyes, you've got luggage!" as Dre celebrates the jokes in the background yelling, "Ooooooh Samsonite!" for further emphasis (Barris, 2015).

### ***Relation***

The second strand of public pedagogy, *relation*, draws from "feminist, dialogic, and performance-based theoretical traditions" (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013, p. 147). Scholars who view public pedagogy this way are concerned with spaces that are intentional in its arrangement and receptions creating embodied interactions with knowledge. When discussing music as public pedagogy and musicians as public intellectuals, Gershon (2009) states,

If music is a way of knowing through experience, the role of musicians is that of a public intellectual, a person whose role it is to facilitate entertaining thoughts and embodied knowledge. Like a teacher, musicians are public pedagogues who simultaneously interpret and broadcast their sense-making so that others might make sense of it for themselves. (p. 635)

Public pedagogy privileges dialogue and an interactive method of gaining knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, Rae is intentional about performances of Blackness making decisions in music, clothing, and the setting to contribute to its humor. *Insecure* is set in Los Angeles, California and its surrounding cities. Rae does not shy away from issues related to gang activity in the area, because it is a part of the city. In episode two, mentioned earlier, Lawrence runs into a neighbor nicknamed Thug Yoda and his daughter after his fight with Issa. The neighbor stops to ask if Lawrence is alright; the neighbor happens to be a gang member and because of the neighbor's gang affiliation, he refuses to say words beginning with the letter *C*:

Thug Yoda: Hey Something's up? I ain't seen yo girl in a minute ya'll good? She leave you for another bitch?

Lawrence: What? No!

Thug Yoda: Talk to me blood, me and Nala was just about to watch the Bare Bears

Nala: Care Bares daddy

Thug Yoda: (*kneeling down and softening his voice*) ah ah ah ah we don't use no C-words sweetheart. This a blood house. (*turning back to Lawrence*) you sure you bool man?

Laughter is an embodied reaction to humor and includes other non-verbal reactions such as head shaking, eye rolling, teeth sucking, coupled with verbal inaudible to signal disbelief, elation and other reactions to respond, theorize, and communicate. The women in the den laugh aloud in entertainment and disbelief at the ridiculousness of the conversation between the two men and laugh harder at Thug Yoda's conversion of *C*'s to

B's. The women also laugh at Thug Yoda's alternative performance rooted in contradictions. In this moment he is not a hardened criminal, like mass media presents gang members, but one who is gentle with his daughter and caring when it comes to Lawrence's feelings. This performance bending adds to the shows humor.

### ***Challenge***

The third strand, *challenge*, is defined as “pedagogical moments [which] occur with encounters with a radical other, that which ruptures the capacities of identity, language, and image” (Burdick & Sandlin, 2013, p. 148). Those who understand public pedagogy in this way find innovative ways to understand the world through examining ways of becoming, and ways of being that work against hegemonic convention (Brady, 2006; Giroux, 2004; O'Malley & Roseboro, 2009). O'Malley and Roseboro (2009) associate public pedagogy with “the disruption and transformation of dominant and constraining cultural, political, economic, historical, linguistic, theological, and sociological configurations and consider hegemonic pedagogical moves in media and popular culture to be distinct from public pedagogy” (p.642). Critical pedagogy and by extension critical public pedagogy provides research for understanding power and equity, providing the language to identify and describe the oppressive norms demonstrated in Issa Rae's *Insecure* and through the discussions within the focus group.

For minorities, humor as critique is not a new concept as seen with Black comedians Dick Gregory, Moms Mabley, Richard Pryor, and others (Haggins, 2007; Rossing 2013; Watkins, 1994). As public intellectuals, they merged Black private humor with public audiences as a way to spread awareness about racial tensions and other social

and civic issues. Rae follows in this comedic tradition using *Insecure* and situational humor to expose double standards in race, as seen when Issa has to outperform her mediocre white counterparts. As much as *Insecure* is a celebration of Blackness while critiquing whiteness, the show is also intentional about critiquing Blackness. As the ladies in the den watched episode three, “Racist as F\*\*k” they acknowledged the interactions between Rasheeda and Molly as Rae’s way of critiquing both Blackness and whiteness. Although Rasheeda’s and Molly’s performances of Blackness were different the critique was not on the individual, but the social conditions, oppressive ideas that hindered each woman from being able to be themselves in the workplace.

### **Critical Insights to a Black Women’s Pedagogy of Humor**

After analyzing the data and reviewing existing literature, I came to five critical insights that set the foundation for a Black women’s pedagogy of humor (BWPH). These findings extend the traditional humor frameworks, relief, incongruity, and superiority, to demonstrate the ways humor functions specifically for Black women. These insights function as both a way to further study Black women’s humor and strategies to implement for Black women who use humor in daily life. A Black women’s pedagogy of humor enables Black women to:

1. Acknowledge humor as a product of sociohistorical moments.
2. Engage with popular texts, theoretical concepts, cultural expressions, and others discourses to more easily identify and contextualize Black women’s humor.
3. Lessen the psychological effect of oppressive conditions by humorously naming oppression.



4. Reinforce a critical community rooted in embracing the complexities of Black womanhood and recognizing a Black woman's collective consciousness.
5. Promote humor as a means of self-care.

### ***Acknowledge Humor as a Product of Sociohistorical Moments***

Humor does not happen in a vacuum and in fact, humor is a product of the time. It's often said that comedians are the barometer of morality and values in connection social and political climate. Humor allows people to comment on the world around them. In Black humor traditions, Black people often used humor to think about the world. When Dick Gregory crossed over into white mainstream audiences, he used his platform to offer a look into Black private thoughts and jokes about civil rights (Haggins, 2007; Rossings, 2013). In *Insecure*, the Los Angeles setting created the space for the cast members to joke about gentrification, advancing in the tech industry, and dating. They were able to take the moment or social conditions in LA to also discuss dating in a place that prizes looks or in an advancing tech industry. Within the den dialogues, time and place also dictated the side conversations. The women used humor to examine topics from Colin Kaepernick, R. Kelly, Beyoncé, and everything in between. Off the comedic stage, both *Insecure* and the den dialogue group followed in the traditions of Black or African American humor. Where they displayed their unique insider outsider positions to comment on the world through one-liner and "reading" those who break cultural codes.

***Engage With Popular Texts, Theoretical Concepts, Cultural Expressions, and Other Discourses to More Easily Identify and Contextualize Black Women's Humor***

Though many of the goals within Black humor have not changed, the influences and reception of Black women has become more mainstream. The comedic stage has been a hard place for Black and white comediennes to gain mainstream success and as demonstrated through this study, much of Black women's humor occurs off the comedic stage. A BWPH provides insight into where to find Black women's humor and ways to think through humor as a way to read the world for generations. Humor through irony, signifyin' or even hyperbole has always been present in early writings on Black feminist theories as seen through Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, LaRue, and the Combahee Collective. A BWPH is a return to these texts to recognize the ways they have been reimagined with today's popular texts as seen in works by Ava DuVernay, Lena Waithe, Issa Rae and others. A BWPH reinforces their work while celebrating humor as a subjugated knowledge (Collins, 2000). If, as Bobo (1995) argues, Black women are cultural readers, Black women need to be equipped with the tools needed to read Black women's humor and in turn the world.

***Lessons the Psychological Effect of Oppressive Conditions by Humorously Naming Oppression***

"We laugh because we know that the only way to win this battle of life and liberty is with the pursuit of happiness." Dayle Cumber-Dance (1998)

Though many Black women face multiple forms of oppression, racism was a major oppressive force discussed with the *Insecure* episodes and in the den dialogues.

The women used humor to talk through racism in the form of microaggressions, as seen when Issa talks to her boyfriends about planning beach day and when the ladies in the den talk about hair and identity shifting in the workplace. Beyond these spaces, racism is not new, nor are the incidents against Black people new, however, similar to the ways television raised awareness to the modern civil right movements giving white audiences a visual image of the atrocities Black people faced, social media has provided instant access and widely circulated images to racist actions. A 2018 *New York Times* Op-Ed piece lists 39 accounts of white people “calling the police to complain about black people doing everyday activities,” (To the next ‘BBQ Becky,’; 2018) or what I like to call living. The list included Black people “wrongfully” paying bills at restaurants, cutting grass, shopping, sleeping, eating ice cream in their homes, playing golf, swimming, enjoying a wine tour and many more. Unfortunately, these experiences reminded Black people of the not so distant Jim Crow era and the figurative form of over policing, the act of systemic emotional control of Black bodies, through both written and unwritten rules. Though the *New York Times* article listed individuals policing Black bodies, according to Hattery and Smith (2017) this perceived resurgence of heavily policing Black bodies is more than individual preference but is indicative of the deliberate and intentional ways systemic structures are designed as a means of control. The effects of over policing Black bodies include a constant paranoia that causes one to live on the edge of a nervous breakdown. Although these experiences are enough to make one mad, many responses to these incidents was ironic laughter. Social media coverage calls out over policing incidents pointing to the absurdity in calling the police when the crime is simply living life. In

response, Black people gave signifyin' titles to those who made false and hyperbolic allegations like "BBQ Becky" and "Permit Patty" using direct, cutting humor toward the oppressive conditions, in these cases oppressive individuals.

Comedian Niecy Nash stars in a satirical commercial for the hotline, 1-844-WYT- FEAR to help white people decide if calling 911 for non-emergency situations is appropriate. The number directs them to a call center full of Black people who can assure the caller that the situation is not an emergency and in fact, the Black person is just carrying on daily life. In this 1:30 minute commercial, Nash and her team directly call out oppressive forces. In this case, the oppressive force is the white fear of Black everyday life.

#### **Figure 4**

##### **Nash's Satirical Commercial (To the Next 'BBQ Becky,' 2018)**



Humor is often the best form of social commentary and in many ways indicates the morality of a people or nation. The humor used as social critique in this commercial is twofold. As a form of relief humor, it allowed Black people a way to laugh through and

cope with the emotional trauma of over-policing. But as a form of superiority humor, in which the minority laughs at those in positions of power, it gave Black people the space to laugh at whiteness and to laugh at the absurdity of oppression. As the commercial directly calls out white fear as an oppressive force for Black people, it indirectly opens a larger conversation surrounding the real fear that many white people have of being *called* racist even when one is committing racist acts as seen in the *New York Times* list (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Khan, 2011). For many white people, to be called racist is just as offensive as calling a Black person the n-word. When the “BBQ Beckys” and “Permit Pattys” were called out on social media for their racist actions, they posted apology messages on social media defending their actions as not racist but out of a concern for safety and protocol. They received backlash including losing jobs and harassment demonstrating the ways that taking actions based on irrational white fear is not only oppressive to Black people but white people as well.

***Reinforces a Critical Community Rooted in Embracing the Complexities of Black Womanhood and Recognizing a Black Woman’s Collective Consciousness***

Black women belong to a Black cultural community with distinct forms of humor that reinforce communal ties. As Collins’ asserts, there is a collective Black women’s consciousness based on shared experiences and values. This does not mean that all Black women think the same, but there is some familiarity or sense of belonging between Black women. As expressed within the den dialogue, Black women as strangers can share a look or a smile and know what the other is thinking. But as Bettez and Hytten (2013) contend, building a critical community is more than this. They describe critical

community as something fluid and grounded in common bonds, commitment, accountability, ongoing reflexivity, and explicit attention to power dynamics (p. 48). Applying this description and using humor as a tool for creating critical community, Black women are able to reinforce and sustain their communities. Recognizing a Black women's collective conscious (Collins, 2000) as it relates to "common ground" and the ways Black women's humor already calls "explicit attention to power"—as demonstrated through Niecy Nash where humor was a tool for both critiquing others and critiquing self—I would like to highlight the ways humor allows Black women to reinforce critical communities through commitment and accountability to other Black women and through ongoing reflexivity.

**Commitment and Accountability.** In my family it is understood that, if we cannot make jokes and laugh both with and at you, it shows our lack of commitment to each other. In its most simple form, humor motivates one to be accountable to oneself and to the larger community. Both *Insecure* and the den dialogue group displayed a strong commitment to the preservation of Black womanhood through humor. For the participants, humor was used to describe the commitment they had to each other and to a larger image of Black womanhood and Black women friendships. Using humor, the women empowered each other to do better, and supported each other in that transition or as den dialogue participant Zora mentioned, "I'm acknowledging that there is a part of myself that's vulnerable for me... I'm going to use my vulnerability to help you be better." As seen within all conversations, this meant using humor to both upbuild and correct. Though the humor in this form is more critical and biting at times, it forces one

to be accountable for their actions. This sense of commitment is prevalent among many Black women as much of the literature on Black feminisms suggests.

**Ongoing Reflexivity.** Reflexivity can be described as the act of becoming self-aware or being aware of one's own biases in critique and reflection. I contend that as Black women recognize the weight and responsibilities that comes with acknowledging intersectionality, they consciously practice ongoing reflexivity. Dubois outlines double consciousness, as:

A peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

Black feminists extend this from double consciousness to multiple consciousness (King, 1988), or intersectionality, in which one reconciles race and nationality, gender, and class. For the African American woman who must deal with multiple oppressions, culture and identity is even more complex. Taylor (2013) claims, “For Black women, one is not racialized and then gendered, nor can one exist as a racialized or gendered person. She is taught to know herself as a compound identity” (p. 49). Recognizing this, “compound identity” does not completely eliminate biases, but it does make one aware of their own biases and the biases others hold against them. Because these various positions are never truly reconciled, there is always a sense of reflexivity and negotiation when trying to maneuver through the world. The point here is that Black people in America have always participated in ongoing reflexivity for survival and preservation with varying results.

Most are familiar with the media depictions of Black women through the controlling images mammy and jezebel. In efforts to correct these exaggerations, many overcorrect them feeding into and creating binaries in one's identity. For example, to correct the idea of a jezebel, one must first acknowledge that this trope exists, and then resist being overtly sexual. In connection to humor, the conversation below demonstrates reflexivity in the everyday:

Zora: I feel like I am constantly aware of how I am presenting myself and depending on where I am, that awareness and who's around, that awareness is extremely heightened... sometimes I feel conflicted because we do like to laugh and make other people laugh but where the conflict comes from is when I'm the black girl in front of a group of white women and I don't turn off my personality and you laugh but then I'm like are we laughing together? So then I start to feel troubled on the inside because... I am fully aware of what I am doing and I am fully aware that a part of this is to disarm your faculty and I am making you more receptive of my presentation and things of that nature.

For Zora, turning off her personality means not using her sense of humor or being strategic about how it is used. She is trying to reconcile race and gender and she understands that her use of humor can be read or misread based on her position. She questions if she is being laughed with or laughed at, and at whose expense.

Angie: I would say another place where it gets conflicting for me and to your point, I do turn it off, and it's not like because I can't be funny, but I don't feel like entertaining you humans, you mere mortals like I don't feel like it. Ya'll can come get this work and we can be about our business but and when I do that, I'm somehow attitudinal. It's like What's wrong with her? What's the problem? She didn't make us laugh this morning?

Zora: Right!

Angie: I'm not here to make you laugh! And if I do this... If I fall victim to my humanness for lack of a better word, and I don't feel like making you laugh today



or something happened in class in particular when I don't teach a lesson well, when I know I could have done better and students were not receptive because normally I'm funny or normally I'm engaging but I couldn't get past you not doing the reading so I could get funny with you. You don't get jokes cause you ain't do what you were supposed to. But then I find myself feeling so inadequate because I didn't use humor, that tool I already have at my disposal but I didn't use it because you didn't come prepared either. So you didn't make the way straight enough for me to use it, but I still feel like I'm walking away feeling inadequate.

As Angie too reflects on her own use of humor as a tool as she tries to reconcile race, gender, and profession. As a Black woman she knows that not being amicable or funny could mischaracterize her as "attitudinal" or an angry Black woman. She goes further explaining her humor as an educator. Being an educator is not only about teaching the material, but it is very much a performance where student engagement is important. For her, not using humor is equated to feelings of inadequacy especially when students are unresponsive. This performance pressure can be overwhelming, shown when Angie says, "falling victim to my humanness." But more interesting, is her use of humor with conditions. Like Zora, she is strategic about when to use humor knowing the tool is ineffective when her students are unprepared. Both women show agency in their negotiation and dealings with others. Though both women have similar experiences, they share a collective consciousness demonstrated through the ways they negotiate humor. For Black women, critical community is a healing place (hooks, 1993) where they can talk candidly about the trials and triumphs of the day. Recognizing the need for community is a step towards recognizing the need for self-care and critical hope.

### ***Promote Humor as a Means of Self-Care***

“Caring for myself is not self-indulgent, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” Audre Lorde (1988).

Some call older millennials the generation of contradiction. As outlined, older Black millennials, now called xennials, had a different upbringing than the generations before and interestingly enough may parallel the experiences of baby boomers as both grew up during times of great social change. Because of events like the Columbine shooting and other mass shootings, they were the generation of security and over protection. While most categorize this generation as overconfident, they are driven by the very things that harm them, success and opportunity. They have the most student debt, yet they want to vacation. Unlike other generations, they understand the need for self-care in ways previous generations did not.

The need for self-care and special attention to mental health is especially important when one is constantly forced to negotiate various positions in the world. This fracturing of self can create perpetual paranoia an uncertainty that not only takes a mental and emotional toll, but a physical toll on one’s body. For Black women, these effects include, hypertension, diabetes, eating disorders, depression. Black women are insidiously praised for their strength and resilience reinforcing yet another trope or controlling image, the strong Black woman (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Davis, 2015). For Black women, this trope fails to acknowledge the need for assistance because doing so is a sign of weakness. When Black women do not exhibit “that good Black woman’s strength” (Den dialogue participant Jessie), their womanhood is diminished by the

normalization of struggle (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). As hooks (1993) expresses, “Black women are so well socialized to push ourselves past healthy limits that we often do not know how to set protective boundaries that would eliminates certain forms of stress” (p. 55). Socialization begins in girlhood when many are taught to work twice as hard because of their varying marginalized positions. As girls mature to women, they take on additional work in the home and in their places of employment adding more stress.

There is some truth in the cliché phrase, laughter is the best medicine. Humor is a form of self-care as seen in the den dialogues where humor was always present even when discussing difficult subjects. In this study, humor was only fostered in an environment where the women felt comfortable enough to be vulnerable. Black women often find solace within various social circles where conversations and their individual communication styles allow them to stop internalizing thoughts and emotions, validate experiences, and belong to a spaces to be without judgments (Bryant-Davis, 2013). In *Insecure* and the den dialogues, the women found solace in their friendship groups. They called on their friends to decompress through laughter and finding humor in the day. Black women’s humor is cathartic. The physical release of laughter and the emotional letting go, or escape is a tool that the participants used frequently.

### **Evidence of a Black Women’s Pedagogy of Humor**

As seen through this study, Black women’s humor is coded by misdirection, double, and triple meanings. These meanings change at the discretion of the user allowing one to weaponize humor when needed. As seen through this study, humor was

used to ease racial tensions, correct racial assumptions, thwart impeding microaggressions, strengthen bonds, and emphasize general absurdity. Black women's humor is pliable and reflects its own history and discourse. A BWPH allows Black women to identify the distinct brand of humor through specific communicative patterns (signifyin', asking questions, choral speech) and interpret its meanings. Evidence is Black women's humor is everywhere. I asked the women to share texts that help them and others better understand Black womanhood and identify instances of Black women's humor. They offered an array of suggestions from various platforms including books, television and film, and music and podcasts. In the following section I will highlight a few of their suggestions and how they demonstrate a BWPH. A more complete list of their suggestions is in Appendix F.

### ***Books***

Black women have a longstanding history of being public intellectuals theorizing about Black lived experiences in a variety of ways. Black feminists as rhetoricians have used forms of humor for centuries. I would argue that Black women were humorists and satirists before calling themselves feminists. To illustrate, I suggested a few Black feminist texts including Guy-Sheftall's (1995) anthology *Words of Fire*. It is important to understand the cyclical relationship lived experiences and theory share. For many Black feminists, theoretical perspectives are created by lived experiences and analyzed for further insight. Guy-Sheftall's anthology not only provides many foundational texts that explore Black womanhood and the development of a Black female consciousness but provides evidence for the ways Black women have weaponized their humor to explain

their experiences. Sojourner Truth's 1851 "Women's right or Aint I a woman speech" is often used when teaching students rhetorical strategies. Though her use of images is powerful, it is filled with humor in form of outrage. As she nears her speech, she says:

Den dat little man in black dar, he say women cant have as much rights as men,  
'cause Christ wan't a woman! Whar did your Christ come from? Whar did your  
Christ come from? From God and I woman! Man had nothin' to do wid him!  
(Truth, as cited in Sheftal, 1995, p. 36)

As a Black woman, and based on my own experiences with older Black women, I can hear the voice inflection signaling disbelief and indignation. The more concrete example of her humor is in the logic rooted in irony. Truth critiques sexism arguing that Jesus Christ would not exist on earth without a woman. By saying the signified, "*your* [emphasized for effect] Christ," she acknowledges her knowledge on bible truths. She knows *her* Christ was not born from a man as she calls into question the man's knowledge about the same doctrine. If a woman was able to take on this monumental task, then a woman should be able to take on the smaller but also important task of voting. Asking questions to highlight the absurdity of the situation dismantles the man's faulty logic and elicits a humorous response from the Black women in the den.

Moving forward to the 1970's, Linda LaRue expresses frustration with the women's liberation movement. In "The Black Movement and Women's Liberation," she argues against using the term "common oppression" to fuse the plights of Black and white women in the name of a larger Women's liberation movement because they are not the same plight. She says:

“Common oppression” is fine for rhetoric, but it does not reflect the actual distance between the oppression of the Black men and women who are unemployed, and the “oppression” of the American white woman who is “sick and tired” of Playboy foldouts, or of Christian Dior lowering hemlines or adding ruffles, or of Miss Clairol telling her blondes have more fun. (p.164)

La Rue (1970) offers a more biting critique arguing that the forms of oppression Black and white women face are not equal and should not be fused together. In the context of this research, La Rue “reads”<sup>17</sup> the women’s liberation movement exposing its flaws and contradictions. Den participant Jessie likens this example to Luvvie Ajayi’s (2016) book *I’m judging you: The do-better manual* discussed earlier. In this case, La Rue is ultimately urging those in the Women’s liberation movement to “do better” and recognize the differences in oppression. Truth, La Rue, and Ajayi each became public intellectuals in their own rights and used irony and critical humor to call out oppression.

Den participant Maya suggested the book *Having our say: The Delany Sisters’ First 100 years* (Delany et al., 1993). Unlike the women in *Words of Fire*, these women best demonstrate Black women’s every day humor. In this oral history, Sarah, “Sadie,” and Elizabeth, “Bessie,” Delany recall stories from the first 100 years of their life. Through humor they recall trials in civil rights, education, their relationship with each other, and relationships with partners. In a 1993 interview Bessie says, “When people ask me how we’ve lived past one hundred, I say, ‘Honey, we never married. We never had husbands to worry us to death!’” (Jones, 1995). Bessie’s quip speaks to the radical

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<sup>17</sup> As mentioned earlier, “reading” is the art of correction through signifying insults. Flaws are identified and exaggerated to correct behaviors or thoughts.

decision not to get married and have a family as the time period often dictated. The sister's humor provided lessons in love and hope despite their humble beginnings.

### ***Television And Film***

Following *Insecure* as an example of Black women's humor, the women suggested television shows and films with women as strong Black leading characters. Television sitcoms *Living Single* (1993) and *Girlfriends* (2000) were the most popular suggestions. These shows parallel *Insecure* with Black women ensemble casts, plot lines set in everyday life, and more realistic depictions of Black women. The humor is comfortable and mirrors the conversations and styles shown in the den dialogues as the women tease each other. For films, the women mentioned a few ensemble casts movies such as *The Color Purple* (1985) and *Waiting to Exhale* (1995). More interestingly however, they suggested the 2018 film *Black Panther*. The Marvel superhero film takes place between the fictional African country Wakanda<sup>18</sup> and the United States. Though the majority of the Black women in the film are secondary characters, the film portrays them as important and complex. The women were mentally and physically strong, as seen with the Dora Milajie, an all women army of bodyguards chosen to protect King T'Challa (Black Panther) and Princess Shuri. Both exude what den participant Jessie calls, "that good Black women's strength." Princess Shuri encapsulates a Black women's humor with her quick wit and banter. T'Challa and Okoye, general to the Dora Milaje, travel to South Korea to catch the man who killed T'Challa's father and bring him back to

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<sup>18</sup> The fictional African country its known for its advancing technology created by an element called Vibranium. Princess Shuri it the head of all technological advancements in the country.

Wakanda. The man escapes, and in the scuffle, FBI agent Everett Ross is wounded. T'Challa brings agent Ross to Wakanda for healing. Princess Shuri exclaims, "Great another white boy to fix, this should be fun" (2018). The humor here is twofold. For Marvel fans, they know this is a reference to the film *Captain America: Civil War* and character Bucky Barnes travels to Wakanda to heal from an injury. However in a BWPH reading of the film, the line is indicative of the ways Black women have both literally and figuratively "fixed" or "saved" white men and women.<sup>19</sup> Princess Shuri recognizes her saving power and finds humor in saving those who are supposed to have more authority than her, white men. Later, when agent Ross wakes up from his surgery and begins walking around the lab, a startled Princess Shuri says, "Don't scare me like that colonizer!" In this more critical humor, Princess Shuri recognizes the history of African colonization and the fight for its land and natural resources. Her fear is short lived, as she turns back to her work knowing her inventions and intellect are far more advanced than the rest of the world, demonstrating a form of superiority humor.

### ***Music and Podcasts***

As Angela Davis's (1998) work *Blues Legacies and Black Feminisms: Gertrude "Ma Rainey," Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* demonstrates, there is humor in music and more specifically the blues; and well, Black women know the blues literally and

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<sup>19</sup> This was depicted in the film *Hidden Figures* (2017) based on the true story of mathematicians and NASA "human computers" Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughn, and Mary Jackson and their indispensable contributions the 1960's space race. In one scene, Johnson is shunned from attending an important board meeting because, "There's no protocol for women attending." In response, Johnson replies, "There's no protocol for a man circling Earth either, sir." (Melfi et al., 2017). Here Black women's humor is shown through irony.



figuratively. Den participant Angie suggested Aretha Franklin's complete music catalogue. In addition to Franklin's powerful feminist lyrics in "Respect" and her rendition of "Natural Woman," she inserts Black women's humor and signifyin' girl talk. In the 1967 song "Dr. Feel Good" she sings:

I don't want nobody always sittin' right there lookin' at me and that man. Be it my mother, my brother, or my sister, would you believe it, I'll get up, put on some clothes, go out and help him find somebody for himself if I can. Yes I will... but oh when me and that man get to lovin' I tell you girls, I dig you, but I just aint' got time to sit and chit and sit and chit chat and smile. (Franklin, 1967)

The lyrics display humor through friendly banter, overt sass, and what Jason King (2018) calls good "sistagirl camp." Franklin is protective over her man and the wandering eyes of others stating the lengths she'll go to, to help someone else find a mate, "I'll get up, put on some clothes, go out and help him find somebody for himself if I can." When it comes time to spending time with her man, like the other blues women Davis (1998) examines, she's quick to ditch the girls, "I tell you girls, I dig you, but I just aint' got time to sit an chit and sit and chit chat and smile."

Neo-soul artist Erykah Badu was suggested for her storytelling qualities and relatability. Den participant Zora exclaims, "She is just funny in her songs!" The den then breaks out in her famous song "Tyrone," singing "you better call Tyrone, call him!" The song, from Erykah Badu: Live (1997), is about a woman dealing with her deadbeat boyfriend. She sings:

Every time we go somewhere I gotta reach down in my purse to pay your way,  
and your homeboy's way, and sometimes your cousin's way!... I think you better

call Tyrone (call him) and tell him come help you get your shit... you need to call Tyrone (call him) but you can't use my phone. (Badu, 1997)

The women laugh at the lyrics as they recall previous relationships. Like Franklin (1967) Badu uses humor though her fed-up sass. In the last line, "You need to call Tyrone, but you can't use my phone," Badu knows the boyfriend does not own anything and before he can ask her to use her phone, she steps in and to say he cannot. In the live performance album you can hear the crowd break out into laughter and cheer at the ending.

As mentioned earlier in the discussion on Black creatives using digital spaces, podcasts have created room for Black women to speak about their expertise and experience. These digital spaces provide larger audiences access to a variety of knowledge. The Getting Grown podcast demonstrates the ways Black women are merging theoretical concepts and popular culture in everyday conversations. As public intellectuals, hosts Keia and Jade (2020) describe the show as

two happy and hardworking (Blackity) Black Women who are just trying to learn how to adult, for real... each week [we discuss] Kitchen Table Talk, Petty Peeves, and Lessons in Black Women Self Care, as we try to figure out life as 30-somethings.

Keia, with a doctorate in Higher Education and a focus on equitable education, often brings theoretical concepts to the conversations as Jade, entrepreneur and stay at home mom, makes practical application to the concepts when talking through popular culture. In the segment "Kitchen Table talk," they pay homage to the kitchen as an educational space for Black women. While at the kitchen table they discuss more serious topics such as "imposter syndrome," or feelings of inadequacy despite one's success, toxic

masculinity, and lessons from their mothers. The humor is conversational and similar to the conversations from the den dialogues as the women pick on and uplift each other

In using a BWPH to analyze these mediums, Black women's humor becomes more apparent. Black women's humor is a communicative pattern with distinct rhythms and movements. Its instinctual and improvisational elements make it malleable for Black women to use at their leisure. As a public pedagogy, it allows them the ability to disengage in situations that are not advantageous providing lessons on handling various oppressions (Truth and La Rue), lessons in love (Franklin and Badu), and lessons on navigating daily life (Getting Grown podcast). These examples coupled with the Den dialogues demonstrate the ways Black women are living a BWPH as they come to recognize the complexities of their laughter and humor. When Black women comprehend the complexities of their humor, they are better equipped with tools that help them not only survive the world but preserve their dignity and sanity as they do so.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND CLOSING THOUGHTS

I set out to study Black women's everyday humor and demonstrate Black women's abilities to use humor to make sense of the world. I had the pleasure of working with four Black women who I am fortunate to call friends. We laughed together watching Rae's *Insecure* and though at times we laughed at different things, it was in the moments we laughed together, at situations and not punchlines, that reminded me why Black women's humor was something to study. This study expanded research on Black women's humor by extending and reinforcing the traditional humor frameworks while offering an alternative, more culturally specific entry into studying Black humor through a Black women's pedagogy of humor (BWPH) that in turn inserted Black women's voices back into the literature.

I wanted to write something meaningful, something that was important, and something that was a reflection of myself. In choosing to write about Black women's humor, I wanted to share a piece of myself while celebrating the often misunderstood nature of Black women's humor. Early on, I realized I would encounter challenges with the perceptions of this project versus its realities. These challenges, or limitations as some may call them, reinforced my initial curiosities and speak directly to the research questions what is a Black women's pedagogy of humor and how are Black women public pedagogues? A Black women's pedagogy of humor is an acknowledgment that Black

women have a distinct humor demonstrated by its unique form and function. It is both a method of studying Black women's humor, and an outcome to using Black women's humor.

### **Taking This Project Seriously: Navigating “Tell Me a Joke” Syndrome**

In taking on this project, I knew I would face challenges by both traditional and non-traditional academic audiences. When most think about humor, they immediately think about jokes and not theory. In an early meeting about my research I was asked, “well this is about humor, so tell me a joke.” While others in the room groaned, I knew moving forward this was going to be an ongoing request and a common misconception about this project. Though not as forward, I faced the same request from students while teaching undergraduate humor courses (syllabus is included in Appendix F). Both this project and my courses are not only to demonstrate that Black women are funny, but more importantly, it is an analysis and invitation to explore the historical and social conditions that create a need for humor. Why is it that marginalized groups can laugh while facing adversities?

To eliminate “tell me a joke” syndrome, I reinforced that this project lived in the spaces where humor occurred off traditional comedic stages, where the pressure to make easy punchlines lessened. This is not to say that these moments do not exist in places like beauty shops, kitchens, front porches, and even classrooms, but within these spaces the humor is spontaneous and unrehearsed, situational, and demonstrates humor in its most natural settings in everyday life (Bergson, 2002). There are the places Black women hone their skills as public intellectuals and cultural readers (Bobo, 1995).

### **“But Everyone has a Sense of Humor”**

This is true; however as seen in the literature review, not all senses of humor are equal or equally recognized. Jewish and other white ethnicities, women, usually read as white women, and Black male humor are widely recognized and even nuanced, by the academy. Yet in studying Black women’s humor, the quieter voice in the literature, there is resistance. Why is it worth study? Isn’t the humor the same? All of these different humors have moments of universality, however, to understand the universal, we must also understand the specific. Lorraine Hansberry (1969) says it best when she writes, “I believe that one of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific” (p.128). There are universal elements in humor as seen through the philosophical frameworks of humor and existing medical research on its healing properties. However, while conducting this study, Black women’s humor was important because it highlighted a group missing from much of the humor research. As demonstrated within this study, older Black millennial women have a unique perspective on the world and choose public places beyond the comedic stage and onto other platforms such as digital spaces to theorize their perspectives. The literature agrees that all types of people laugh and share humor, yet the subject matters that cause laughter are different depending on age, time, and context.

### **“I Want Something for My Own. Something They Don’t Get”: Telling the Secrets and Revealing Black Women Code**

While this topic excited me, I was aware that in many ways I would be revealing parts of Black womanhood that, for many, was hidden away for a reason. There is safety

in this coded language as seen through slavery, reconstruction and beyond where speaking out meant death. My dilemma was, and still is, how much should I reveal about Black women's communicative practices? How can I celebrate the complexities of Black women's humor without completely disrupting the nuances of the humor? How do I represent my work in a way that does not read as a "how-to" guide to using a Black woman's sense of humor? Angie, having the same concerns, articulated her reservations about defining and reproducing a Black woman's humor:

So I guess my conflict in answering the questions, not that they aren't good questions, is that I find Black women's humor as a sacred space and quite frankly, I don't want these white people to know and giving voice to that gives them access to a world that I don't want them to have access to. One because they have way too much access to my shit in general and I want to limit that as much as I can, but to think there is something quite sacred in the community between black women how we laugh, when we laugh, what we say, when we say it, how we look, the way we look, the way we wear our hair, what we can say, and what we can't say, all those things are a part of a language that we have learned to speak over time that sort of gives us our humor. In an attempt to articulate it is also an attempt to make it readable i.e understandable for white folk and that troubles me a bit because even though they know this world exists as much as they should know, I also want something of my own. Something they don't get. That's probably selfish of me.

Angie was not wrong. As history has shown, once something is named or labeled it can be reproduced or even appropriated. Black women's humor is something sacred and I appreciated the women in the den dialogue for being transparent in the ways they negotiated humor for public consumption and relished in the sacred properties. Though I shared Angie's apprehensions, through the existing research and our conversations, I recognize the ways Black women's humor creates its own protections through cultural

nuance. Black women's humor is an ingroup humor. Joseph Boskin (1997) describes

Black humor writing:

Three and a half centuries of oppression produced a particular style of resistance humor that entwined defiance, cunning, inventiveness, and retaliation. Stories, anecdotes, jokes, and pranks record [B]lack counteraction to oppression and also provide insight into the character of the oppression itself. (p. 147)

Black humor is an enduring humor that survives through coded language and misdirection. Though some communicative patterns may be reproduced, the experiences and unique perspectives cannot be replicated as demonstrated by Angie's sister's encounter in the doctor's office. Comedian Lenny Bruce said, "Satire is tragedy plus time. You give it enough time, the public, the reviewers will allow you to satirize it" (Bruce & Cohan, 1967). The same can be said about Black women's lived experiences and the ways Black women often find and use humor. The Black experience in America is rooted in tragedy, and yet Black laughter has prevailed. Black humor survives because of its shape shifting, signifyin' properties. Like most coded language, just when it is understood, it changes. These changing moments make humor significant to study and in doing so, this work has affirmed my initial curiosities.

When I began conducting research, there were few Black women studying Black women's humor specifically. As seen in the literature review, the majority of the research was in Folklore and communications studies. As I end this portion of my study, scholarship on Black women's humor has grown with the increase in media and



television literacy studies and the work surrounding digital media studies.<sup>20</sup> I look forward to fine tuning a Black women's pedagogy of humor as it gives me a vantage point for my continued study of Black women's humor. I leave this excited for future research possibilities including extending concepts and extending practices within research methods.

### **Future Research Projects Through Extending Concepts**

Though this project was rooted in the experiences of older Black millennial women ages 30–36 at the time of the study, I recognize the ways Black girls and Black women of all ages negotiate and understand humor. Black girls are learning and observing Black women's humor at a young age through their interactions with other Black women. As girls play, they mimic and recreate these encounters, when they grow older, some of these little girls are seen as “acting grown” when they display a woman's sense of humor as seen in talking back and making jokes at the expense of someone older. Because of the increasing scholarship on Black girlhood and radical Black girlhood, what impact might understanding humor have on school-aged girls who are witty or sassy? In watching and talking with others about *Insecure*, I noticed the ways older Black women could relate indirectly to the storylines. As the women in the den dialogue laughed with the show because they were going through the same trials, older Black women I talked to, laughed at the character's inexperience. These women laughed in reflection remembering when they went through the trials. Because of this, I am interested in discovering if and how a BWPH translates the same in different age groups.

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<sup>20</sup> See scholarship by J. Finley, Kristen J. Warner, Regina Bradley, and Danielle Morgan Fuentes

Further research should consider the ways humor fosters a sense of agency as a form of radical Black girlhood as well as the ways older Black women expand on these humors based on their experiences.

As demonstrated in the research, Black humor is rooted in African oral traditions. Rae, because of her African and African American heritage, infused *Insecure* with both African and African American cultural signifiers seen through her clothing choices and use of cast members and writers with African descent. If, as I suggest, a Black women's pedagogy of humor is a return back to these culturally informed ways of knowing, how might this pedagogy differ when centered on African lived experiences lived experiences? African lived experiences vary in the same ways African American experiences vary depending on age, region, class, and other factors. As my research suggests, humor functions as a means to critique, to form community and to engage or disengage with others. Future research should consider the transnational responses and implications to Black women's humor.

Last, in conducting this research I argue, Black women are already doing the work of public pedagogy and creating significant conversations as public intellectuals. They are changing the social and political landscape through various forms of humor such as irony, satire, and for some, even slapstick. Political analyst and attorney, Angela Rye, offers a more critical example of Black women's humor in the political arena through her directness and political "reads." Others are making use of the digital space through various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, and more recently Tik Tok, an online video sharing platform. At one point in time, Black people

were once a part of a digital divide in which access to technology and digital platforms was limited. As this divide is closing, in part due to smart phone technology, a Black digital presence continues to grow as they become online content creators and influencers. If Black women's humor is an ingroup humor, future research should consider how do these spaces impact Black women's humor? Examining this in more detail may reveal if and how Black humor thrives and survives as performance mediums change in addition to how it codes or hides in plain sight.

### **Future Research Methods Extending Black Women's Research Methods**

I was recently asked why I choose to keep the research participants anonymous. In my mind the answer was, because I thought I was supposed to. In reflecting on this moment, I realized for me there may have been a disconnect between the ways understanding traditional research methods as I interpreted them to and the ways I chose to navigate my own cultural inclinations. My research sample consisted of my own friend circle. They were not anonymous women, but women I cared for, trusted, and wanted to protect from being labeled mere "research subjects." In choosing Black feminism as a framework to center the experiences of Black women from their perspective, this leaves the question, was I censoring their experiences through my own interpretations? According to Leith Mulling (2000), "for research to be transformative, the subjects of research must become actors in the transformation... as well as interpreters of their own space and place... in their own language and from their own experiences" (p. 27). To do this, Venus-Winters (2019) argues the ways Black researchers often negotiate their research as they consciously and subconsciously rely on cultural intuition when

conducting research; but how does this impact cultural research? How does this impact cultural research where the researcher is a part of the culture? Does intuition work against traditional research methods? Just as there are culturally relevant teaching practices, I argue for an increased space for various culturally relevant research methods that honor subjugated knowledges.

Because research on Black women is dynamic through the use of performance and narration, I suggest a more embodied transcribing and coding practice to capture the nuances of Black women's behaviors beyond speech. Language is both verbal and non-verbal; therefore, to acknowledge these hybrid languages, they need to be transcribed. Because this would require the researcher or research team to understand non-verbal patterns, future research by those studying cultural groups where they hold membership, should consider ways to capture, transcribe, and analyze non-verbal languages. Doing so not only produces more data, but it may also reveal greater insights when coupled with interviews and focus group research.

### **Closing Thoughts: Laughter is the Best Form of Medicine**

My own experiences with Black women's humor led me to this study. Through humor I understood myself and others as I observed what they were laughing at and why. For many, laughter is our most instinctive form of medicine. Dayle Cumber Dance (1998) gives the rationale for Black women's humor and its many side effects:

We use our humor to speak the unspeakable, to mask the attack...to camouflage sensitivity, to tease, to compliment, to berate, to brag, to flirt, to speculate, to gossip, to educate, to correct the lies people tell on us, to bring about change.  
(p.xxii)

Just as I began this dissertation with how I came to humor, I close sharing the humorous moments I will hold on to forever.

### **Granny had our Full Attention**

Granny was diagnosed with bone cancer in 2003. I was a freshman in college and she was so proud of me. She bragged to her friends that I was going to a university and continued to brag as I accepted the scholarship her high school alumni association presented to me. What I remember most about her was her laughter and the laughter we shared. In the middle of the living room we laughed together as I watched her hike up her culottes to try her hand at being a rapper. She then proceeded to beatbox and rap about the Wheel of Fortune winner on the television screen. We laughed as I wore her nightgown and house dresses and the people in the neighborhood called me “Little Grace.”

As her health declined, she was in and out of the hospital, but she still maintained her humor. On one of her good days, she had everyone’s full attention. She had a room full of visitors and continued to be the life of the party. One of my aunts had the stage as she doted on Granny. Not to be outdone, Granny had enough. “There’s a man outside in the hallway. I think he’s a doctor. Why don’t you go talk to him. He seems nice,” she says to my aunt.

“Oh Ma. I’m okay,” my aunt responds. With a smirk on her face, Granny asks, “What’s the matter? You don’t know what to say?” The room breaks into laughter as my aunt gets irritated. She continues, “Just say, hi my name is... what’s your name?” As she

talks, she whips her leg out from under the covers as if she is trying to entice a male suitor. My aunt can't help but join in the laughter even if it was at her expense.

### **She Wants Me to be Happy**

My Mom and I talk every day, multiple times a day. She thinks she's hiding her concern in her daily phone calls, but I know she worries about me being alone and so far from home. We make each other laugh in every phone call. One day she tells me maybe I'm too picky. I know I'm not that picky, just particular. She cracks herself up saying, "Maybe you like them pretty boys. You know like Terrance Howard or something!" I smile to myself thinking, who likes Terrance Howard these days? "No, I can't trust someone with eyes that light" I say to her. We laugh together in confirmation. "Well you just might be picky. I'm looking at so and so's husband..." and she proceeds to list a few married couples. "MA!" I say laughing, "So you want me to marry homely!"

"NOOOOO! I want you to marry nice!"

"Nice and homely mother."

She screams laughing and I can imagine her grabbing her stomach through the phone. I take advantage of the moment and continue, "Forest Whittaker is nice and homely!"

"He's also taken!"

"Bye mother."

### **Sitting with Sista**

She got her formal cancer diagnosis the week after I defended my dissertation proposal and on her birthday. During a time for celebrations, we sat still. Sat with thoughts. Sat with feelings. Sat. These transitions were unexpected but familiar to us

both. When she came home from the hospital, visitors came in and out of her house to sit and to breathe with her. In between the breathing there were stories and laughter. We laughed together as we devised a plan to get rid of guests.

She says, "I'll fake sleep."

"Or," I say, "just wince a little and reach for something, anything!"

"Even better!" she says, and we laugh and wink at each other like the bad children we are. Later, as she loses her hair, we laugh at her horrible taste in wigs and hats, and I call her a boho chic Diane Keaton. We imagine the cool colors she can dye her hair. Purple first, then maybe orange, or pink. Laughing she says, "I can spray paint cancer sucks on the side of my head!" I shake my head and my feelings away as I tell her she always takes things a step too far. We continue to laugh and to sit. Laughter gets us through these times of uncertainty. We laugh to release anxiety, to stop the impending tears, to laugh so hard we cry without fear of follow-up questions, to mask the anger and frustration, to console one another. We sit, and we laugh it away.

"Violet learned then what she had forgotten until this moment: laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears" Toni Morrison (*Jazz*, 1992).

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APPENDIX A  
RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

In-person recruitment script:

Hi \_\_\_\_\_,

As you know I am currently working on my PhD. at UNCG in the ELC program. For my dissertation project, I am interested in understanding the ways Black women use and understand humor. A major part of this study is watching and analyzing Issa Rae's HBO series "Insecure." If you are willing and available, I would love for you to be a part of a small focus group where we will watch a few episodes of this show together. Do you think this is something you may be interested in?

Approved IRB 5/1/18



## APPENDIX B

### IRB-APPROVED CONSENT FORM

#### UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

#### CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: Sassy Subversions. Knowing glances, and Black women's laughter: Moving Towards a Black women's pedagogy of humor

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor (if applicable): Erica-Brittany Horhn and Dr. Leila Villaverde

Participant's Name:

**What are some general things you should know about research studies?** You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

**What is the study about?** This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this study is to investigate what role humor plays in the Older Black millennial woman's lived experience.

**Why are you asking me?** You have been chosen to participate in this study for the following reasons:

1. You identify as a Black woman
2. You are between the ages of 30- 36

**What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?** If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in two focus group sessions approximately five hours long. Each session will comprise of two parts, viewing two episodes of the HBO series *Insecure* (each approximately 30 minutes long) and a three-hour semi-structured discussion of the show. During the three hours, you will participate in a brief introductory writing activity detailing your reactions to the episode. Followed by a group discussion about the show. The session will end with a closing writing activity where you will write about your impressions of the focus group. If needed, individual interviews will be conducted, scheduled at your convenience, to ask clarifying questions about the ideas mentioned during the focus group. If you have further questions about your role in this study, please contact Erica Horhn at [REDACTED].

**Is there any audio/video recording?** Each focus group session will be tape recorded to ensure your words and ideas are not misrepresented. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described below.

**What are the risks to me?** The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. As a participant in the study, there are minimal risks to this study.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Erica Horhn, principal investigator AND Dr. Leila Villaverde if applicable. Erica Horhn may be reached at [REDACTED].

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

**Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?** There is a lack of Black women represented within academic humor research providing limited discussions on Black women's humor. As a result, the voices and experiences of Black women continue to be silenced. As a participant in this study, you may help aid in breaking this silence by helping to add more Black women's voices to this growing field of research.

**Are there any benefits to me for taking part in this research study?** There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?** There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

**How will you keep my information confidential?** All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. To protect your confidentiality, I will use pseudonyms and exclude any descriptions that easily identify you. The audio, transcriptions, and focus group information will be stored on a password protected computer as well as through Box, a 3-lock online file storage service.

**What if I want to leave the study?** You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

**What about new information/changes in the study?** If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:** By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, in this study described to you by .

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved IRB 5/1/18

## APPENDIX C

### IRB-APPROVED FOCUS GROUP WRITING PROMPTS

#### **Beginning prompt**

After watching the selected television episodes, the participants will be asked to write about the following:

1. Describe your reaction to the episode. What were the best parts and why.
2. How could did you relate to the episodes shown?

#### **Ending prompt**

After the semi-structured discussion, the participants will be asked to reflect on their experiences in being a part of the focus group.

1. Describe your experience working in this focus group? What did you learn about yourself?
2. What things were you unable to say that you wished you could say?
3. How did you use humor during the focus group? If you feel you did not, comment on the ways you saw humor used during this session

## APPENDIX D

### IRB-APPROVED FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This is a semi-structured discussion format. Below is a list of guiding questions. Based on the responses to the questions and as the conversation continues, additional clarifying questions may be asked.

1. What cast member do you best relate to and why?
2. Describe the ways you able to relate to the show as a whole.
3. Do you feel comfortable with the ways Black women are depicted on these episodes? Why or why not?
4. Describe what makes this episode funny.
5. In what ways does Rae use humor to discuss her work environment?
6. Can each of you describe a time where you had to deal with issues in the workplace?
7. Within the episode, how is humor used to describe friendship? Love and romantic relationships?
8. Describe a lesson learned from the episodes viewed.

## APPENDIX E

### SYLLABUS: “TAKING HUMOR SERIOUSLY”

NOTE: This is the syllabus I created for the first year seminar course on African American humor. In creating and teaching this course, I realized that I too excluded Black women’s voices in the same ways they were excluded in the larger humor canon. It is my goal to continue updating the syllabus

#### **“Taking humor seriously”: An Exploration of African American Humor**

**Course Description:** George Carlin once said, “every comic sees the world through a prism that the average person doesn’t see through.” By looking at smaller, alternative facets of daily life we visualize a more complete picture. For this course we will examine African American humor and its connections, contributions, and critiques on modern American life. We will examine theoretical explanations for African American laughter and how it manifests in popular texts. We will use scholarly texts and documentaries, to analyze the sociohistorical importance of African American popular materials such as folk humor, comedy sketches, television shows, political cartoons, and standup comedy shows to explore the intersections of the African American and American experience.

**The Big Question:** How does humor give insight into the complexities of African American cultural experiences while also contributing and critiquing the larger American experience?

**Disclaimer:** Students should be ready to encounter edgy material that may be considered offensive. Some texts may be explicit in nature (cursing, sexual content). Students should be fully aware that these texts should still be discussed with respect to the opinions of peers, the instructor, and the creator of the text.

#### **Student Learning Outcomes:**

By the end of this course students will:

1. Engage a question of enduring and/or contemporary importance and be able to define and discuss the complexities and implications of the question.
2. Understand the interdisciplinary and sociohistorical function of humor

3. Identify leading humor theories and explanations concerning what motivates humorous responses
4. Engage with unfamiliar texts, cultural expressions, and discourses in order to learn how to be socially and culturally sensitive and aware of modes of expressions outside of their own experiences.
5. Develop and hone research, writing, and speaking skills.

### **Required Materials:**

**Textbook:** Watkin, Mel. *On the real Side: The History of African American Humor* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition

**\*additional readings will be posted to Blackboard in the readings folder\***

### **Assignments:**

**Coursework (10%):** You are required to attend and offer significant participation in class through , but not limited to: in and out of class assignments, student-led discussions, lectures, quizzes, short response papers. To receive credit, you must be in class ( for in class work) and all outside coursework must be submitted on time. **(Objectives 1-5)**

**Critical Analysis Assignments (30%):** You will be required to write two (2) ( 500- 750 words) or produce a creative body of work ( must be approved by professor) where you will work through the big question as it relates to the information discussed in the units. *In particular, you should address how humor functions for African American people in the unit. You will provide specific examples and additional research, if needed, to make and support your claims.* Each product is worth 15% **(Objective 3,4,5).**

**Big Question Essay (20%):** In a 750-1000 word essay you will demonstrate your best ability to define the big question and to discuss its complexities. This is also a culmination of your critical analysis essays so feel free to draw from and expand on some of these ideas. Consider these questions to help you invent ideas and organize your thoughts: How do you articulate the big question for our course? What makes the question difficult or complex? What leads people to debate answers to the question? What, if any, are the social and global implications of the question? **(Objective 1, 2, 3, 5)**

**Theories of humor presentation (5%):** In a 5-8 minute presentation, you will demonstrate your preliminary understanding of the humor theories discussed in the class by addressing the following questions: 1. How is the theory defined or described? 2. How might it function for African American people? 3. How might it help or hurt our understandings of African American cultural experiences? You will provide a short (2-minute max) example of what you describe as African American humor to help support your discussion. **(Objectives 3 and 5).**

**Double Entry Journal (20%):** For all of the journal articles read, you will provide specific quotations from the readings on one side of page and on the second half of the page you will write your notes and comments about the quotations in reading. This is both a reflective and critical journal that will help you better answer the big question as well as serve as a research journal. There will be a graded journal check at midterm. The final check in will be due the last week of class. See example on Blackboard (**Objective 1, 3, 4, 5**).

**Group Creative Project (15%):** The final group project will encompass the theories, themes, and major ideas discussed in class. The purpose of the project is not to demonstrate that you are funny, but to understand the nuances of humor and the African American experience in America. You should find a creative and engaging way of highlighting our big question. The final visual project (short film, documentary, sketch show, stand-up routine, commercial, Public service announcement etc.) should be no more than 8 minutes long and should reflect the work of all group members. During midterm week you will present your project proposals in the form of a storyboard or script. **All final presentations will be given during our final exam period. (Objectives 1, 2, 3, 4, 5)**

**Course Schedule:**

**BB: Blackboard**

**OTR: On the real side (Mel Watkins textbook)**

Weeks	Readings	Out of class activities and assignments
<b>Week 1</b> <b>8/ 20</b>	Introductions and expectations to the course; Syllabus;	
<b>8-22</b>	Read: “Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition” by Early, Carpio, and Sollors. <b>(BB)</b>	
<b>Week 2</b> <b>8/27</b>  <b>8/29</b>	<b><u>Humor theory</u></b> Read: “What Makes Us Laugh” Leon Rappaport <b>(BB)</b>  Read: “Humor” Sigmund Freud From <i>Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious</i> <b>(BB)</b>	Begin Double entry journal for this week’s readings. <b><u>Remember this is an ongoing and living document. This should be updated regularly.</u></b>



<b>Week 3</b> <b>9/3- 9/5</b>	<b>Theories of humor presentation</b>	
<b>Week 4</b> <b>9/10</b> <b>9/12</b>	<b><u>Oral Traditions and Slavery</u></b>  Lecture: oral traditions and connections to an American identity  Read: “Characteristics of Negro Expression” Zora Neale Hurston ( <b>BB</b> )  Read: Watkins (Chapter 1) ( <b>OTR</b> ) Read: Excerpts from <i>Laughing fit to Kill: Black Humor in the fiction of Slavery</i> by Glenda Carpio	Television log: Choose a television show with a majority African American cast. Using Hurston’s essay, what specific expressions can you identify and how? How are they reflected in your personal expressions? <b>Due Thursday (in-class group share)</b>
<b>Week 5</b> <b>9/17</b> <b>9/19</b>	Lecture: Folktales and hidden meanings  Read: “Brer Rabbit Tricks Brer Fox Again” ( <b>BB</b> )  Read: “The Wonderful Tar Baby Story” ( <b>BB</b> )  Read: Charles Chesnutt, <i>Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line</i> ( <b>BB</b> )	Jigsaw group reading discussion for the Folktales. Each group will be responsible for leading the discussion on their groups chosen folktale and its connection to humor (in class group share)
<b>Week 6</b> <b>9/24</b> <b>9/26</b>	<b><u>Antebellum humor</u></b>  Read: Watkins chapter 2 and 3 ( <b>OTR</b> ) “Antebellum North” and “After the Civil War”  View the documentary <i>Ethnic Notions</i> in class with discussion	

<b>Week 7</b> <b>10/1</b> <b>10/3</b>	Lecture: Mark Twain and Southern humor  Read: Watkins: Chapter 4 (Jim Crow) (OTR)	E-Visit Ferris State University's Jim Crow museum. (Group Share activity)  <i><b>Critical Analysis One due: This includes the Oral Tradition/ Slavery and antebellum units</b></i>
<b>Week 8</b> <b>10/8</b> <b>10/10</b>	<u><b>Harlem Renaissance humor</b></u>  Lecture: Significant changes of America during the Harlem Renaissance. Read: Watkins chapter 6 (OTR)  Project proposals presentations with Q&A	<i><b>Final group project proposal due in class with class</b></i>  <i><b>Journal check in due in Blackboard by midnight</b></i>
<b>Week 9</b>	<b>Fall Break</b>	
<b>Week 10</b> <b>10/22</b> <b>10/24</b>	<u><b>Black Arts/ Power humor</b></u> Read: Excerpt From "Laughing Mad" by Bambi Haggins (BB)  Listen: Dick Gregory, <i>Living in Black and White</i>  Read: "Dick Gregory and Activist style: Identifying Attributes of Humor Necessary of Activist Advocacy" by Jonathan Paul Rossing (BB)	
<b>Week 11</b> <b>10/29</b> <b>10/31</b>	View Colored Museum with class discussion and connection to final Projects  Class activity: Creating our own modern Humor museum exhibits	<i><b>Critical Analysis two due: includes the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts/Power Unit.</b></i>
<b>Week 12</b>	<u><b>Contemporary African American humor</b></u>	

<b>11/5</b>  <b>11/7</b>	Lecture: Satire and the limits of African American humor; audience v. artists  Read: “What are You Laughing at? Examining White Identity and Enjoyment of Black Entertainment” by Omotayo Banjo (BB)  Viewing: The comedy of Dave Chappelle and Aaron McGruder	
<b>Week 13</b>  <b>11/12</b>  <b>11/14</b>	Lecture: African American humor and digital measures; memes, tweets, hashtag humor, and correction  Read: Black nerds: New directions in African American humor” David Gilotta (BB)	
<b>Week 14</b> <b>11/19</b>  <b>11/21</b>	Read: “Tweets, tweeps, and signifyin’: Communication and cultural performance on "black twitter" (BB)	<b><i>Big Question Essay Due</i></b>
<b>Week 15</b> <b>11/26</b>	Independent Work week (in class): Final Project prep	
<b>Week 16</b>  <b>12/3</b>	Independent work week ( out of class): Final Project Prep	<b><i>Double Entry Journal Due</i></b>
<b>Final Exam Period</b>	<b>Creative Presentations Festival with Q&amp;A</b>	

## APPENDIX F

### A BLACK WOMEN'S PEDAGOGY OF HUMOR READING LIST

This is a compilation of interdisciplinary works suggested by the women in the den dialogues. These works provide theoretical texts to understand Black womanhood and humor, as well as popular texts, performances, and music to give concrete examples of Black women's humor in action. The material, though extensive, is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but one that offers a variety of accessible texts that best theorize and capture performances of Black womanhood and Black women's humor. Shown below is a sample of selected materials chosen by the women from the den dialogue.

<b>Books on Black feminisms</b>
<b>These selections give more theoretical insights into Black womanhood and Black women's collective consciousness</b>
<i>Words of Fire</i> (Sheftal, 1995)
<i>When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost</i> (Morgan, 1999)
<i>Black Feminist Thought</i> (Collins, 2000)
<i>Bad Feminists</i> (Gay, 2014)
<i>Black Feminism reimagined: After Intersectionality</i> (Nash, 2018)
<i>Eloquent Rage</i> (Cooper, 2018)
<b>Fiction and non-fiction</b>
<i>Comedy: American Style</i> (Fauset, 1933)

<i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> (Hansberry, 1959)
<i>Sula</i> (Morrison, 1973)
<i>for colored girls who considered suicide when the rainbow was not enuf-</i> (Shonge, 1975)
<i>Honey, Hush!: An Anthology of African American Women's Humor</i> (Dance, 1998)
<i>Salvage the Bones</i> (Ward, 2011)
<i>The Last Black Unicorn</i> (Haddish, 2017)
<i>The Mother of Black Hollywood</i> (Lewis, 2017)
<i>Well, That Escalated Quickly: Memoirs and Mistakes of an Accidental Activist</i> (Ramsey, 2018)
<b>Film and Television</b>
<i>The Color Purple</i> (1985)
<i>Daughter of the Dust</i> (1991)
<i>Women of Brewster Place</i> (1989)
<i>Waiting to Exhale</i> (1995)
<i>BAPS</i> (1997)
<i>Dear White People</i> (2014)
<i>Black Panther</i> (2017)

<i>Black Lady Sketch Show</i> (2018)
<i>The Astronomy Club: Black Comedy Sketch Show</i> (2019)
<b>Music artists: These include the artist's entire catalogue, just not one project</b>
Nina Simone
Beyoncé
Ari Lennox
Lizzo
Aretha Franklin
SZA
Jill Scott
Queen Latifah
Erykah Badu
India Arie
<b>Podcasts</b>
Getting Grown Podcast
Happy Black Woman
On One with Angela Rye
Small Doses with Amanda Seals
Therapy for Black Girls
Balanced Black girl
2 Dope Queens